

Name _____

Period _____

Date _____



Son of Frankenstein (1939) **Directed by Rowland V. Lee**

Cast

Basil Rathbone as Baron Wolf von Frankenstein
Boris Karloff as the Monster
Bela Lugosi as Ygor
Lionel Atwill as Inspector Krogh
Josephine Hutchinson as Elsa von Frankenstein
Donnie Dunagan as Peter von Frankenstein
Emma Dunn as Amelia
Edgar Norton as Thomas Benson
Perry Ivins as Fritz
Lawrence Grant as Burgomaster
Lionel Belmore as Emil Lang
Michael Mark as Ewald Neumuller
Caroline Frances Cook as Mrs. Neumuller

Credits

Directed by Rowland V. Lee
Produced by Rowland V. Lee
Written by Wyllis Cooper
Cinematography George Robinson
Music by Frank Skinner
Distributed by Universal Pictures
Release Date January 13, 1939
Budget \$420,000
Box Office \$921,000

Son of Frankenstein (1939) is a horror monster film and is the third film in Universal Studios' *Frankenstein* series and the last to feature Boris Karloff as the Monster as well as the first to feature Bela Lugosi as Ygor. The picture is a sequel to James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* directed by Rowland V. Lee and starring Basil Rathbone, Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi.

The film was a reaction to the very popular re-releases of *Dracula* with Lugosi and *Frankenstein* with Karloff as a double-feature in 1938. Universal's declining horror output was revitalized with the enormously successful *Son of Frankenstein*, in which the studio cast both Karloff and Lugosi.



76 years ago today, *Son of Frankenstein* capped off the first great movie trilogy.

On January 13, 1939, Universal Pictures released *Son of Frankenstein*, the follow-up to 1931's *Frankenstein* and 1935's *Bride of Frankenstein*. *Bride* itself was an unprecedented event: the first major sequel to a horror film, it not only continued the story established in the first movie but expanded upon it with more characters and an even richer storyline. Sequels were considered for a long time by studios as quick cash grabs, usually done on the cheap and often lacking the qualities that made the original film a success. The idea of a sequel continuing the story, with the same kind of production values, storytelling and craft, was almost unheard of when director James Whale made *Bride*; a third film created with the same care hardly seemed possible.

And yet *Son of Frankenstein* is not only a worthy successor to the first two films, but even bettered them in some aspects. The result was that Universal's first three *Frankenstein* movies formed not just the first great horror franchise, but the first superb movie trilogy in cinema history. This trio of films told one complete, satisfying story with a beginning and an end, setting the template for everything from *The Godfather* trilogy to the original three *Star Wars* films to the more recent *Dark Knight* triumvirate.

Universal was in difficult financial straits and its once prolific horror output had been on the wane as the end of the 1930s loomed. Likewise, actors Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi were in career slumps after their respective breakout roles as Frankenstein's monster and Dracula led to a streak of ghoulish roles for both that had finally begun to dry up. A double reissue of the original *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* (1931) had proven to be such a huge success that Universal decided to resurrect its most famous monster for another rampage.



Although Karloff agreed to come back for his final turn as the monster, James Whale was not interested at all in helming a third film. So the studio enlisted Rowland V. Lee, a one-time actor who had transitioned into a reliable if unremarkable director of pictures such as 1929's *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (the first Fu Manchu film of the talkie era), *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1934), and *The Three Musketeers* (1935). While the studio did not have any ambitions for *Son of Frankenstein* beyond using it as a money-making machine, Lee had a different vision: he saw it as a grand, dark fairy tale, quite different from the campier black comedy of *Bride*, with a visual design akin to something out of the great German Expressionist films of the preceding decade.

Universal ponied up the budget, allowing Lee to not only make the film he envisioned but with a cast unparalleled at the time for a horror picture. In addition to Karloff, Lugosi was cast as the insane, hunchbacked Ygor, Basil Rathbone was recruited to play the title role, and Lionel Atwill provided the fourth big name as the steadfast, haunted, one-armed Inspector Krogh. Although the film was originally supposed to be shot in color, it ended up being done in black and white and benefits greatly from that decision: Lee and cinematographer George Robinson use shadows and contrasts spectacularly in the movie, while the jagged, diagonally shaped sets and bleak, blasted surroundings are reminiscent of films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919).



Rathbone plays Wolf von Frankenstein, son of the late Henry Frankenstein (Colin Clive), now an adult and returning to his family's home village to move himself, his wife and son into the ancestral castle. The villagers are understandably cold and suspicious, given the havoc that his father wreaked on the town years earlier, but Wolf does his best to reassure them that he means no harm. His promise, however, is short-lived as he soon meets the deranged, deformed Ygor -- his neck and mind both broken in a hanging gone wrong -- who informs Wolf that his father's creation is still alive. Wolf, determined to vindicate his father and succeed where he failed, revives the monster -- but discovers that Ygor has other, more horrifying plans for the creature.

Willis Cooper's screenplay delivers perhaps the best-developed characters in the series yet. Wolf starts out with the finest of intentions -- to clear his family's name -- but is nevertheless drawn to the same dark science that was his father's legacy. Rathbone is much more dynamic than Colin Clive ever was. Karloff maintains the same formidable physical presence and pathos he had in the first two films, although the monster is mute here -- a step backward from his developing language skills in *Bride*. Atwill's police inspector is a rational, reasonable man haunted by the loss of his arm as a child to the creature decades earlier, with the actor adding subtle comedic business to the way he utilizes his false arm. And then there is Lugosi in what may be the best role of his career, his Ygor at once both as monstrous and pitiable as the creature he tends to.



Modern audiences won't find *Son of Frankenstein* frightening in the least, but it's still a tremendously entertaining and old-fashioned horror yarn with the imagery and dread of a fractured fairy tale. It was parodied by Mel Brooks in his best movie, 1974's *Young Frankenstein* (Kenneth Mars' spoofing of the inspector is especially hilarious and dead-on), but Brooks' loving homage doesn't really dilute the fanciful power of the original film, thanks to the latter's brilliant cast and expertly crafted atmosphere.

The *Frankenstein* franchise lumbered on for a few years after that, although Karloff handed off his signature role to a succession of other actors, including Lugosi himself, Lon Chaney Jr. and Glenn Strange. The movies themselves – quickies like *Ghost of Frankenstein*, *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* and *House of Frankenstein* – were entertaining enough (*House* was the *Avengers* of its time!) but clearly B-level productions lacking the artistry and vision of the first three films. There's a popular – and largely true – conception that the third film in a trilogy often is where the series falters, and it's easy to cite anything from *Return of the Jedi* to *X-Men: The Last Stand* to *The Dark Knight Rises* as proof of that. But when it came to the first major genre trilogy of its kind, the third chapter – *Son of Frankenstein* – sits proudly alongside its two predecessors.

Don Kay

<http://www.denofgeek.us/movies/son-of-frankenstein/242691/son-of-frankenstein-hitting-the-horror-trifecta>

Comprehension Questions

1. Why is Wolf Von Frankenstein returning to his homeland?
2. Who is Ygor, and what is his connection to the Monster?
3. What happened to Inspector Krogh's arm?

8. How does the Monster react to Ygor's death? Why?

9. How is the last scene a typical Hollywood ending?

Discussion Questions

1. You have watched several movies in this unit that shows the development of sound throughout the decade in the 1930s. How did films develop and change from ***Frankenstein (1931)***. Think of things like lighting, camera moves, and the pacing of the various films you have watched.
2. Compare and contrast the horror films of the 1930s and the horror films of today? If you like one more than the other, explain why. What is done in the era you prefer by the filmmakers? Do modern horror films of today owe anything to the early horror films of the 1930s? What might that be?
3. How did elements in any of the horror films you have watched add to the emotional feeling of that film. You should think of make-up, music, the use of German Expressionism, and the acting style of that era to answer the question.

4. How did genre films (Horror at Universal, Gangster movies at Warner Bros., and Musicals at MGM) help the studios and their profit. Why do you think studios gravitated to genre films?

5. Boris Karloff played the Monster in the first three *Frankenstein* movies of the 1930s. He never saw repeating that character role several times hurt his acting career. His greatest roles all seem to be in the Horror genre. Why do you think many actors don't like playing the same role? Should actors not repeat a role in several movies? What actor today has repeated the same role several times? Has it hurt his or her career?

6. In *Son of Frankenstein*, how do you see in the film itself elements of the Studio System at work? Be specific. Think of how films were made during the Studio System, and explain how you see that well-oiled machine at work in this movie?