

FRANKENSTEIN : A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Frankenstein, A Trail-Blazing Novel By Mary Shelley

Frankenstein : or, The Modern Prometheus is a novel written by the British author Mary Shelley. Shelley wrote the novel when she was 18 years old. The first edition was published anonymously in London in 1818. Shelley's name appears on the revised third edition, published in 1831. The title of the novel refers to a scientist, Victor Frankenstein, who learns how to create life and creates a being in the likeness of man, but larger than average and more powerful. In modern popular culture, people have tended to refer to the Creature as "Frankenstein" (especially in films since 1931), despite this being the name of the scientist. *Frankenstein* is a novel infused with some elements of the Gothic novel and the Romantic Movement. It was also a warning against the "over-reaching" of modern man and the Industrial Revolution, alluded to in the novel's subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*. The story has had an influence across literature and popular culture and spawned a complete genre of horror stories and films. It is arguably considered the first fully realized science fiction novel. The novel raises many issues that can be linked to today's society.

Plot

The novel opens with Captain Robert Walton on his ship sailing north of the Arctic Circle. Walton's ship becomes ice-bound and he spots a figure travelling across the ice on a dog sled. Soon after, he sees an ill Victor Frankenstein, and invites him onto his ship. The narrative of Walton is a frame story that allows for the story of Victor to be related. At the same time, Walton's predicament is symbolically appropriate for Victor's tale of displaced passion and brutality.

Victor takes over telling the story at this point. Curious and intelligent from a young age, he learns from the works of the masters of Medieval alchemy, reading such authors as Albertus Magnus, Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus and shunning modern Enlightenment teachings of natural science (see also Romanticism and the Middle Ages). He leaves his beloved family in Geneva, Switzerland to study in Ingolstadt, Bavaria, Germany,

where he is first introduced to modern science. In a moment of inspiration, combining his new-found knowledge of natural science with the alchemic ideas of his old masters, Victor perceives the means by which inanimate materials can be imbued with life. He sets about constructing a man using means that Shelley refers to only vaguely. The main idea seems to be that Victor built a complete body from various organic human parts, and then simulated the functions of the human system in it. In the novel it is stated that he uses bones from charnel houses (repositories for the bones of bodies of the dead), and

"The dissecting room and the slaughterhouse furnished many of my materials; and often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation, whilst, still urged on by an eagerness which perpetually increased, I brought my work near to a conclusion."

Victor intended the creature to be beautiful. However, when it awakens he is disgusted. As Victor used corpses as material for his creation, it has yellow, watery eyes, translucent skin, black irises, and long black hair and is around 8 feet (2.4 m) in height. Victor finds this revolting and runs out of the room in terror. That night he wakes up with the creature at his bedside facing him with an outstretched arm, and flees again, whereupon the creature disappears. Shock and overwork cause Victor to take ill for several months. After recovering, in about a year's time, he receives a letter from home informing him of the murder of his youngest brother. He departs for Switzerland at once.

Near Geneva, Victor catches a glimpse of the creature in a thunderstorm among the boulders of the mountains, and is convinced that it killed his younger brother, William. Upon arriving home he finds Justine Moritz, the family's beloved maid, framed for the murder. To Victor's surprise, Justine makes a false confession because her minister threatens her with excommunication. Despite Victor's feelings of overwhelming guilt, he does not tell anyone about his horrid creation and Justine is convicted and executed. To recover from the ordeal, Victor goes hiking into the mountains where he encounters his "cursed creation" again, this time on the Mer de Glace, a glacier above Chamonix.

The creature converses with Victor and tells him his story, speaking in strikingly eloquent and detailed language. He describes his feelings first of confusion, then rejection and hate. He explains how he learned to talk by studying a poor peasant family through a chink in the wall. He performs in secret many kind deeds for this family, but in the end, they drive him away when they see his appearance. He gets the same response from any human who sees him. The creature confesses that it was indeed he who killed William (by strangling) and framed Justine, and that he did so out of

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revenge. But now, the creature only wants companionship. He begs Victor to create a synthetic woman (counterpart to the synthetic man), with whom the creature can live, sequestered from all humanity but happy with his mate.

At first, Victor agrees, but later, he tears up the half-made companion in disgust and madness due to the thought that the Female Creature might be just as evil like the creature himself. In retribution, the creature kills Henry Clerval, Victor's best friend, Thomas Kearney, and later, on Victor's wedding night, his wife Elizabeth. Soon after, Victor's father dies of grief. Victor now becomes the hunter: he pursues the creature into the Arctic ice, though in vain. Near exhaustion, he is stranded when an iceberg breaks away, carrying him out into the ocean. Before death takes him, Captain Walton's ship arrives and he is rescued.

Walton assumes the narration again, describing a temporary recovery in Victor's health, allowing him to relate his extraordinary story. However, Victor's health soon fails, and he dies. Unable to convince his shipmates to continue north and bereft of the charismatic Frankenstein, Walton is forced to turn back towards England under the threat of mutiny. Finally, the creature boards the ship and finds Victor dead, and greatly laments what he has done to his maker. He swears to commit suicide. He leaves the ship by leaping through the cabin window onto the ice, never to be seen again.

Shelley's Inspiration

"It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld my masterpiece completed..."

During the rainy summer of 1816, the "Year Without a Summer," the world was locked in a long cold volcanic winter caused by the eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, age 19, and her love (and later husband) Percy Bysshe Shelley, visited Lord Byron at the Villa Diodati by Lake Geneva in Switzerland. The weather was consistently so cold and dreary that summer to enjoy the outdoor vacation activities they had planned, so the group retired indoors until almost dawn talking about science and the supernatural. After reading *Fantasmagoriana*, an anthology of German ghost stories, they challenged one another to each compose a story of their own, the contest being won by whoever wrote the scariest tale. Mary conceived an idea after she fell into a waking dream or nightmare during which she saw "the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together." There is speculation that this was based on work by Andrew Crosse of Fyne Court, Broomfield, Somerset who carried out early experiments passing an electrical current through a chemical solution in an attempt to induce crystal formation. On the 26th day of the experiment he saw what he described as "the perfect insect, standing erect

on a few bristles which formed its tail" probably from contaminated instruments. This was the birth and growth of *Frankenstein*. Byron managed to write just a fragment based on the vampire legends he heard while travelling the Balkans, and from this Polidori created *The Vampyre* (1819), the progenitor of the romantic vampire literary genre. Two legendary horror tales originated from this one circumstance.

Publication

Mary Shelley completed her writing in May 1817, and *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* was first published on 1 January 1818 by the small London publishing house of Harding, Mavor & Jones. It was issued anonymously, with a preface written for Mary by Percy Bysshe Shelley and with a dedication to philosopher William Godwin, her father. It was published in an edition of just 500 copies in three volumes, the standard "triple-decker" format for 19th century first editions. The novel had been previously rejected by Percy Bysshe Shelley's publisher, Charles Ollier and by Byron's publisher John Murray.

Critical reception of the book was mostly unfavourable, compounded by confused speculation as to the identity of the author. Sir Walter Scott wrote that "upon the whole, the work impresses us with a high idea of the author's original genius and happy power of expression", but most reviewers thought it "a tissue of horrible and disgusting absurdity" (*Quarterly Review*).

Despite the reviews, *Frankenstein* achieved an almost immediate popular success. It became widely known especially through melodramatic theatrical adaptations—Mary Shelley saw a production of *Presumption; or The Fate of Frankenstein*, a play by Richard Brinsley Peake, in 1823. A French translation appeared as early as 1821 (*Frankenstein: ou le Prométhée Moderne*¹, translated by Jules Saladin).

The second edition of *Frankenstein* was published on 11 August 1823 in two volumes (by G. and W. B. Whittaker), and this time credited Mary Shelley as the author.

On 31 October 1831, the first "popular" edition in one volume appeared, published by Henry Colburn & Richard Bentley. This edition was quite heavily revised by Mary Shelley, and included a new, longer preface by her, presenting a somewhat embellished version of the genesis of the story. This edition tends to be the one most widely read now, although editions containing the original 1818 text are still being published. In fact, many scholars prefer the 1818 edition. They argue that it preserves the spirit of

Shelley's original publication (see Anne K. Mellor's "Choosing a Text of Frankenstein to Teach" in the W. W. Norton Critical edition).

Name Origins

(i) Frankenstein's Creature

Part of Frankenstein's rejection of his creation is the fact that he does not give it a name, which gives it a lack of identity. Instead it is referred to by words such as "monster", "creature", "demon", "fiend", "demonic corpse" and "wretch". When Frankenstein converses with the monster in Chapter 10, he addresses it as "Devil", "Vile insect", "Abhorred monster", "fiend", "wretched devil", and "abhorred devil".

During a telling she did of Frankenstein, she referred to the creature as "Adam". It is likely that Shelley was referring to the first man in the Garden of Eden, as in her epigraph:

Did I request thee, Maker from my clay
To mould Me man? Did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (X.743-5)

The monster has often been mistakenly called "Frankenstein". In 1908 one author said "It is strange to note how well-nigh universally the term "Frankenstein" is misused, even by intelligent persons, as describing some hideous monster..."^[2] Edith Wharton's *The Reef* (1916) describes an unruly child as an "infant Frankenstein." David Lindsay's "The Bridal Ornament," published in *The Rover*, 12 June 1844, mentioned "the maker of poor Frankenstein". After the release of James Whale's popular 1931 film *Frankenstein*, the public at large began speaking of the monster itself as "Frankenstein". A reference to this occurs in *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and in several subsequent films in the series, as well as in film titles such as *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*.

Some justify referring to the Creature as "Frankenstein" by pointing out that the Creature is, so to speak, Victor Frankenstein's offspring. Also, one might say that the monster is the invention of Doctor Frankenstein, and inventions are often named after the person who invented them, and if one is to consider the creature his son (for he did give it life) 'Frankenstein' is his familial name, and thus would also rightly belong to the creation.

(ii) Frankenstein

Mary Shelley maintained that she derived the name "Frankenstein" from a dream-vision. Despite her public claims of originality, the significance of the name has been a source of speculation. Literally, in German, the name Frankenstein means "stone of the Franks". The name is associated with

various places such as Castle Frankenstein (Burg Frankenstein), which Mary Shelley had seen whilst on a boat before writing the novel. Frankenstein is also a town in the region of Palatinate and was the name of Z'bkowice Cel'skie, a city in Silesia, Poland. Moreover Frankenstein is a common family name in Germany.

More recently, Radu Florescu, in his book *In Search of Frankenstein*, argued that Mary and Percy Shelley visited Castle Frankenstein on their way to Switzerland, near Darmstadt along the Rhine, where a notorious alchemist named Konrad Dippel had experimented with human bodies, but that Mary suppressed mentioning this visit, to maintain her public claim of originality. A recent literary essay by A.J. Day supports Florescu's position that Mary Shelley knew of, and visited Castle Frankenstein before writing her debut novel. Day includes details of an alleged description of the Frankenstein castle that exists in Mary Shelley's 'lost' journals. However, this theory is not without critics; Frankenstein expert Leonard Wolf calls it an "unconvincing...conspiracy theory".

(iii) Victor

A possible interpretation of the name Victor derives from *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, a great influence on Shelley (a quotation from *Paradise Lost* is on the opening page of *Frankenstein* and Shelley even allows the monster himself to read it). Milton frequently refers to God as "the Victor" in *Paradise Lost*, and Shelley sees Victor as playing God by creating life. In addition to this, Shelley's portrayal of the monster owes much to the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost*; indeed, the monster says, after reading the epic poem that he sympathizes with Satan's role in the story.

Victor was also a pen name of Percy Shelley's, as in the collection of poetry he wrote with his sister Elizabeth, *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire*. There is speculation that one of Mary Shelley's models for Victor Frankenstein was Percy, who at Eton had "experimented with electricity and magnetism as well as with gunpowder and numerous chemical reactions," and whose rooms at Oxford were filled with scientific equipment.

(iv) "Modern Prometheus"

The Modern Prometheus is the novel's subtitle (though some modern publishing of the work now drops the subtitle, mentioning it only in an introduction). Prometheus, in some versions of Greek mythology, was the Titan who created mankind. Prometheus was also the bringer of fire who took fire from heaven and gave it to man. Zeus eternally punished Prometheus by fixing him to a rock where each day a predatory bird came to devour his liver, only for the liver to return again on the next day; ready for the bird to come again.

Prometheus was also a myth told in Latin but was a very different story. In this version Prometheus makes man from clay and water, a very relevant theme to *Frankenstein* as Victor rebels against the laws of nature and as a result is punished by his creation.

Prometheus' relation to the novel can be interpreted in a number of ways. The Titan in the Greek mythology of Prometheus parallels Victor Frankenstein. Victor's work by creating man by new means reflects the innovative work of the Titan in creating humans. Victor, in a way, stole the secret of creation from God just as the Titan stole fire from heaven to give to the man. Both the Titan and Victor get punished for their actions. Victor is reprimanded by suffering the loss of those close to him and having the dread of himself getting killed by his creation.

For Mary Shelley, Prometheus was not a hero but a devil, whom she blamed for bringing fire to man and thereby seducing the human race to the vice of eating meat (fire brought cooking which brought hunting and killing). Support for this claim may be reflected in Chapter 17 of the novel, where the monster speaks to Victor Frankenstein: "My food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb and the kid to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment." For Romantics era artists in general Prometheus' gift to man compared with the two great utopian promises of the 18th century: the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution containing both great promise and potentially unknown horrors.

Byron was particularly attached to the play *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, and Percy Shelley would soon write *Prometheus Unbound*. The term "Modern Prometheus" was actually coined by Immanuel Kant, referring to Benjamin Franklin and his then recent experiments with electricity.

Analysis

Frankenstein is in some ways allegorical. The novel was conceived and written during an early phase of the Industrial Revolution, at a time of dramatic advances in science and technology. That the creation rebel against its creator can be seen as a warning that the application of science can lead to unintended consequences.

Another interpretation was alluded to by Shelley herself, in her account of the radical politics of William Godwin, her father:

"The giant now awake. The mind, never torpid, but never roused to full energies, received the spark which lit it into an unextinguishable flame. Who can now tell the feelings of liberal men on the first outbreak of the French Revolution. In but too short a time afterwards it became parodied the vices of Orleans—dimmed by the want of talent of the Girondins—deformed and blood-stained by the Jacobins."

A common critique views the story as a journey of pregnancy. The novel taps into the widespread fears of stillbirth and maternal deaths due to complications in delivery. Shelley had a stillborn child the previous year, and her mother had died due to complications from her birth. Frankenstein, the monster's parent, in a sense, is fearful of the release of the monster from his control, when it is free to act independently in the world and affect it for better or worse. Also, during much of the novel Victor fears the creature's desire to destroy him by killing everyone and everything most dear to him. However, it must be noted that the creature was not born evil, but only wanted to be loved by its creator, by other humans, and to love a sentient creature like itself. It was mankind who taught it evil: Victor rejected it, and the creature's poor treatment by villagers taught it how to be evil. In this reading, the creature represents the natural fears of bringing a new innocent life into the world and raising it properly so that it does not become a monster.

The book can be seen as a criticism of scientists who are unconcerned by the potential consequences of their work. Victor was heedless of those dangers, and irresponsible with his invention. Instead of immediately destroying the evil he had created, he was overcome by fear and fell psychologically ill. During Justine's trial for murder, he had the chance to perhaps save the young girl by revealing that a violent man had recently declared a vendetta against him and his loved ones. Instead, Frankenstein indulges in his own self-centered grief. The day before Justine is executed and thus resigns herself to her fate and departure from the "sad and bitter world", his sentiments are as such:

"The poor victim, who was on the morrow to pass the awful boundary between life and death, felt not, as I did, such deep and bitter agony... The tortures of the accused did not equal mine; she was sustained by innocence, but the fangs of remorse tore my bosom and would not forego their hold."

Representing a minority opinion, Arthur Belefant in his book, *Frankenstein, the Man and the Monster* (1999) contends that Mary Shelley's intent was for the reader to understand that the Creature never existed, and Victor Frankenstein committed the three murders. In this interpretation, the story is a study of the moral degradation of Victor, and the science fiction aspects of the story are Victor's imagination.

Alchemy was a very popular topic in Shelley's world. In fact, it was becoming an acceptable idea that humanity could infuse the spark of life into a non-living thing (Luigi Galvani's experiments, for example). The scientific world just after the Industrial Revolution was delving into the unknown, and limitless possibilities also caused fear and apprehension for many as to the consequences of such horrific possibilities.