

Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus

Background Information

Life and Times of Mary Shelley

Mary Shelley was born Mary Wollstoncraft in 1797 to William Godwin and Mary Wollstoncraft— both very prominent and liberal writers. Her mother had written *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman*, which was a very popular feminist work. Mary spent much of her teen years writing stories in Scotland until she returned to London at age 16. She met and fell in love with Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and became pregnant. The two continued their affair until his estranged wife committed suicide, at which point they married. They lost all three of their children, and in 1822 Percy drowned in the Gulf of Spezia in Italy. At the age of 24, she was an impoverished widow, and she supported herself with her writing. *Frankenstein* was published in 1818 when she was only 20 years old. It is considered a huge feminist feat because it was written by the female child of a world-renowned early feminist.

Historical Events:

- 1789: the start of the French revolution (an attempt of the French people to rid themselves of their absolute monarchy). British liberals were excited that the common people were standing up to their oppressors, but they quickly became disillusioned when the revolution became very bloody and its leaders became tyrants themselves.
- 1793 through 1794: the French Reign of Terror under Robespierre. British liberals lost all hope for true justice and equality in that year.
- 1804: Napoleon is crowned Emperor. During this whole time, Romantic writers were turning towards nature as an escape from the harsh realities of their world. Nature was someplace where human tyranny did not reign.

The Romantic Movement

- The Romantics were, for the most part, disheartened liberals.
- They sought solitude in nature, believing that the key to all emotional healing could be found in nature. Nature imagery is the most predominant feature of Romantic literature. “The weather was fine: it was about the middle of August...The weight upon my spirit was sensibly lightened as I plunged into the precipices that overhung me on every side—the sound of the river raging among the rocks, and the dashing of the waterfalls around, spoke of a power mighty as Omnipotence—and I ceased to fear, or to bend before any less almighty than that which had created and ruled the elements...”.
- The idea of the disenfranchised man was also very common. Such men, who found themselves unable to live in society, were often revered and/or sympathized with. *Frankenstein* and his creature are both disenfranchised men—the creature because his form keeps him from any human company, and *Frankenstein* because he eventually feels that he cannot enjoy the company of his fellow men after unleashing a monster among them.
- Many Romantics (like Coleridge and both Shelleys) dealt with the supernatural. One common Romantic trait was making ordinary, everyday things seem wonderful and awe-inspiring. However, some went a step further and dealt with non-natural things. *Frankenstein’s* creature (and his education/life) is not a common thing. It could not possibly be a real thing. Up until the Romantic era, writers wrote fiction that read as though it could possibly be real—and was often taken for truth. *Frankenstein* cannot be misconstrued as real.

Gothic Literature

- It was an offshoot of Romantic literature.
- Gothic literature was the predecessor of modern horror movies in both theme and style.

- Gothic literature put a spin on the Romantic idea of nature worship and nature imagery.

Along with nature having the power of healing, Gothic writers gave nature the power of destruction. Frankenstein is full of the harsh reality of nature. Many storms arise in the book, including storms the night the creature comes to life and the night Frankenstein destroys the corpse of the second creature in the Irish Sea.

- The most common feature of Gothic literature is the indication of mood through the weather. When bad things are going to happen in a Gothic novel, the reader knows it because there is inevitably a storm outside. This is still true in many books and films.

(When Frankenstein is about to encounter his creature in the mountains):

"I quitted my seat and walked on, although the darkness and storm increased every minute and the thunder burst with a terrific crash over my head. It was echoed from Saleve, the Juras, and the Alps of Savoy; vivid ashes of lightning dazzled my eyes, illuminating the lake, making it appear like a vast sheet of fire...I perceived in the gloom a figure which stole from behind a clump of trees near me; I stood fixed, gazing intently...A flash of lightning illuminated the object, and discovered its shape plainly to me; its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity..."

VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN'S "SCIENCE"

Modern readers are often puzzled by Victor's approach to discovering the "elixir of life" in that he does not seem to perform scientific experiments as much as read books. Prior to the eighteenth century, what we call "science" and what we call "philosophy" were essentially the same disciplines. The study of nature and the desire to know how nature functions eventually came to be called "natural philosophy," but the quest for such knowledge was still more what we would consider philosophical than scientific.

Mary Shelley indicates that Victor is a student of this "natural philosophy" when she indicates who some of Victor's early influences were. While admitting that many of these men's theories had been discredited, Victor still admits that it was they who largely set him on the course he was eventually to take.

Cornelius Agrippa was a Renaissance philosopher and scientist whose works reflect a strong interest in the occult and ancient, mystical "sciences" of the near East. His writing blends European interpretations of Plato's philosophy with Jewish Kabbalistic beliefs. His famous work "*De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum*" (the vanity and uncertainty of the arts and sciences), published in 1527, is a treatise on the occult, as a hidden, knowledge that existed in Renaissance Europe and was known to a select few. It is a collection of thoughts on Renaissance magic including such diverse topics as astrology and the effect of planetary motion on human events, occult virtues, the natural tendency of certain "elements" to work harmoniously together and others to oppose one another, spells, methods of predicting the future, numerology, the divine Trinity, the Kabbalistic Names of God and the orders of evil spirits. In terms of "real science," his ideas have all but been discredited by later thinkers and by the processes of observation and experimentation.

Paracelsus was another Renaissance philosopher and scientist who introduced a new concept of disease and the use of chemicals rather than herbs to treat diseases. Paracelsus asserted that diseases were caused by external agents attacking the body, contrary to the then-traditional idea of disease as an internal upset of the balance of the body's humors (yellow bile, black bile, blood and phlegm). To cure the disease, one needed to attack this external agent. Alchemy became the means by which the chemical remedies were prepared. Thus, Paracelsus changed the emphasis of the alchemy from chasing the mythological "Elixir of Life" or "Philosopher's Stone," to making medicines.

Some of Paracelsus's ideas, however, bordered on the occult. He was said to have been taught the secret of the universal solvent in Constantinople. He was believed to have had such tutors as gypsies and sorcerers, and effected miraculous cures of several maladies.

Albertus Magnus was still another Renaissance philosopher and scientist who advocated the search into the natural causes of things apart from the church's position that God was the cause of all effects. For example, in one

of his most famous works Albertus wrote: "The aim of natural science is not simply to accept the statements of others, but to investigate the causes that are at work in nature."

This was a radical idea for the time, as most scholars believed that the scriptures were the sole source of all knowledge. Not only did Albertus advocate what we would call today the scientific approach to studying the real world, but he did so in such a way that his ideas were accepted by the Church.

In a work on plants Albertus wrote, "In studying nature, we have not to inquire how God the Creator may, as He freely wills, use His creatures to work miracles and thereby show forth His power: we have rather to inquire what Nature with its immanent causes can naturally bring to pass," thus placing the emphasis on understanding how nature worked rather than on trying to understand God.

Not everyone held Albertus in high esteem, however. **Roger Bacon**, who was a contemporary, and in many ways a rival of Albertus, was highly critical. He wrote that Albertus, "... is a man of infinite patience and has amassed great information, but his works have four faults. The first is boundless, puerile vanity; the second in ineffable falsity; the third is superfluity of bulk; and the fourth is his ignorance of the most useful and the most beautiful parts of philosophy."

Roger Bacon was, however, an even stronger advocate of experimental science than was Albertus but did not feel compelled to reconcile his scientific theories with Church doctrine. He was also able to demonstrate a number of factual and reasoning errors in Albertus's work.

LITERARY ALLUSION

- Literary Allusion is a writer's comparison of his or her characters to characters in other well-known works of literature. The value of allusion lies in its ability to garner much information in only a title or a character name. By alluding to a work with which everyone is familiar, all of the connotations of the one work are transferred to the new one.

- Shelley uses many literary allusions in *Frankenstein*, referring mostly to Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the biblical account of Adam and Eve.

- The story of Adam and Eve, especially Milton's version, is one that is very well known in Western culture. It is one of the fundamental stories of Western culture. By using that particular story, Shelley was hoping to get as many people as possible to bring the back story of *Paradise Lost* to *Frankenstein*. Shelley wanted the idea of the proud and inquisitive creature being cast out, as well as the idea that being cast out was a horrible thing.

"But *Paradise Lost* excited different and far deeper emotions. I read it...as a true history. It moved every feeling of wonder and awe, that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting. I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own..."

- Another obvious literary allusion in *Frankenstein* is its subtitle: "The Modern Prometheus." Prometheus was a Greek god who was in charge of giving out gifts to the various creatures on Earth. He gave out speed and instinct and such. By the time he got to mankind, he was out of gifts. He decided to go against his orders and gave man fire (symbolic of knowledge). The other gods were angered by his disobedience (partly because now man was too godlike). Prometheus's punishment was that he was chained to a rock. Every day a vulture came and devoured his liver. Every night the liver grew back to be devoured the next day. In several obvious ways, this ancient Greek story is very closely connected to *Frankenstein*.

Frankenstein: The Misunderstood Monster

By Joseph Pearce

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is one of the most influential novels of the nineteenth century; it is also one of the most misunderstood and abused. In recent years, it has been vivisected critically by latter-day Victor Frankenstein, who have transformed the meanings emergent from the novel into monsters of their own contorted imaginations. Most particularly, Franken-feminists have turned the novel into a monster of misanthropy. Seldom has a work of fiction suffered so scandalously from the slings and arrows of outrageous criticism.

Much of the problem in understanding the novel derives from the conflicting forces at work in its pages, forces that were a whirlwind of warring influences in the mind and heart of its teenage author. On a purely emotional level, the young Mary Shelley was surrounded by tragedy, including the death in early infancy of her first child and the suicide of two intimate relations. She was also battling with the monsters of modernity and struggling with the atheistic philosophy of her father and the iconoclastic musings of her lover. Within the pages of *Frankenstein* we see the savagery of Rousseau, the pseudosatanic manipulation of Milton, the Romantic reaction against the "dark satanic mills" of science and industrialism, the conflict between the "light" Romanticism of Wordsworth and Coleridge and the "darker" Romanticism of Byron and Shelley, and, perhaps most enigmatically, the struggle between the two Shelleys themselves, and perhaps the emergence of Mary from Percy's shadow.

Since the personhood of Mary Shelley is daubed across the pages of *Frankenstein* in gaudy shades of angst-driven self-expression, it is crucial to understand something about the author before we can begin to get to grips with the work. In the preface to the Norton Critical Edition of *Frankenstein*, J. Paul Hunter describes Mary as being "irritated by the torments of conventional family values."^[1] Such an assessment is singularly odd considering that Mary had no experience of "conventional family values"—her own family and her own upbringing being anything but conventional. Her father, William Godwin, was a proponent of atheism and an advocate of the dissolution of the institution of marriage, describing marriage as "the worst of all laws"; her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, a proto-feminist, died from childbirth complications eleven days after Mary's birth on August 30, 1797. In 1801 Mary's father remarried. Thereafter, the "family" in which Mary grew up consisted of her father, her stepmother, a stepbrother and a stepsister, and a half sister, Fanny Imlay, the daughter of her mother by Gilbert Imlay. Pace Hunter, any "torments" suffered by Mary Shelley must be laid at the door of her very unconventional family background.

In November 1812, Mary, then fifteen years old, met Percy Bysshe Shelley for the first time. He was with Harriet Westbrook, whom he had just married. In July 1814 Percy Shelley deserted his pregnant wife and one-year-old child and fled to the Continent with the sixteen-year-old Mary, who was also pregnant. In November Harriet Shelley gave birth to her second child; in the following February Mary gave birth, prematurely, to a daughter who died within a few days. Almost a year later, in January 1816, Mary gave birth to a son, William.

In the summer of 1816, Mary and Percy visited Lord Byron at the Villa Diodati by Lake Geneva in Switzerland. After reading *Fantasmagoriana*, an anthology of German ghost stories, Byron challenged Mary, Percy, and his personal physician, John William Polidori, each to compose a story. Byron, responding to his own challenge, began to write about the vampire legends he had heard while traveling in the Balkans. He aborted his attempt to bring the fragment to fruition, but Polidori, using Byron's fragment as inspiration, wrote *The Vampyre*, which, when published in 1819, became the progenitor of the Romantic vampire literary genre. Polidori's modest literary achievement would be eclipsed, however, by *Frankenstein*, which was Mary's response to Byron's challenge.

Mary began writing *Frankenstein* in June 1816, when she was still only eighteen years old; she would not finish it until the following May. The eleven months during which she was working on the novel were almost as macabre in real life as was the unfolding of the plot in the teenager's fevered imagination. In October 1816 Fanny Imlay, Mary's half sister, committed suicide, and in December the drowned body of Harriet Shelley was discovered in the Serpentine, in London's Hyde Park, some weeks after she had presumably committed suicide. On December 30, only days after the discovery of Harriet's body, Mary and Percy were married in St. Mildred's Church in Bread Street, London. (The church had been selected because Bread Street was where John Milton had been born more than two centuries earlier.) In March 1817 Percy was denied custody of his two children by Harriet. All this happened while Mary was working on *Frankenstein* and the shadow of these events account, no doubt, for much of the doom-laden and death-darkened atmosphere of the novel. It might almost be said, or at least plausibly suggested, that the ghost of Harriet Shelley haunted the author's imagination as she worked; if so, it is equally

plausible to suggest that the Monster can be seen as a metaphor for the destructive power of the unleashed passion between Mary and Percy. Following the same line of deduction, it could be said that Frankenstein's guilt-ridden horror of the destruction he had caused is itself a reflection of Mary's guilt at the consequences of her passionate affair with Shelley. This allegorical reading of the novel would place Mary Shelley in the role of Victor Frankenstein, and the Monster in the role of the illicit and destructive relationship between Mary and Percy.

Although the presence of this tragic backdrop pervades the work, it should not eclipse the many other elements that serve to add to the deadly cocktail of depth and delusion that makes Frankenstein such a beguilingly deceptive story. From the very beginning, on the title page itself, we are given tantalizing clues concerning the aesthetic and philosophical roots of Mary Shelley's inspiration and perhaps an inkling of her purpose. In giving Frankenstein the alternative title of *The Modern Prometheus*, and coupling it with the epigraph conveying Adam's complaint from *Paradise Lost*, we see the leitmotif established concerning the relationship between Creator, creature, and creativity. The allusion to the Prometheus myth conjures images of the creation of man in defiance of the gods; the citation of Adam's complaint conjures the image of the creation of man in defiance of man: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay To mould me man? Did I solicit thee from darkness to promote me?"

Prometheus presumes to take powers that are not rightfully his in order to create man; Adam presumes to rebuke his Creator for bringing him into existence. It is clear, therefore, that Victor Frankenstein can be seen as a Prometheus figure, and the Monster as a figure of Milton's Adam.

It is important from the outset to distinguish between the biblical Adam and the Adam depicted by Milton in *Paradise Lost*. The two Adams are very different, and it is perilous to conflate them. The biblical Adam does not rebuke his Creator for bringing him into existence; at most he blames Eve for his fall and implies, in the naked shame of his transgression, that it would have been better if God had not created her to be his mate. He never takes the prideful position of questioning the Creator's wisdom in creating him; still less does he imply the nihilistic option of wishing his own oblivion. On the contrary, it is clear that he remains grateful to God for his existence and grateful for the gift of Eve, in spite of his adolescent defensiveness in the wake of their primal act of disobedience.

Milton's Adam, like Milton's Satan--and, for that matter, Milton's Father and Milton's Son--is a presumptive product of Milton's own theological prejudices, divorced from orthodox tradition. It should be remembered that Milton's quasi-unitarianism is anathema to Protestants and Catholics alike. His Father appears to be a petty dictator; his Satan, a freedom-fighter; his Son, a mere creature, cold and arrogant, who is created after Satan; and his Holy Spirit, conspicuous by his absence. It is therefore a peculiar Miltonian "Christianity" that serves as a catalyst to Mary Shelley's imagination. Whether she knew it or not, she was not reacting against Christianity per se but against a pseudo-Christian heresy. As such, any reading of *Frankenstein* that purports to see it as an attack on Christian orthodoxy, as understood by Protestants or Catholics, is hopelessly awry.

FOOTNOTE:

[1] J. Paul Hunter, preface to Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), p. vii.