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MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY

Born: London, England; August 30, 1797

Died: London, England; February 1, 1851

*Shelley's reputation rests on her technically flawed, thematically rich masterpiece of imagination, *Frankenstein*.*

BIOGRAPHY

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was born in London, England, on August 30, 1797. Both of her parents were celebrated political radicals. Mary Wollstonecraft, her mother, authored *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792) and was an early advocate of sexual equality. William Godwin, her father, was a utopian-anarchist best known for his *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness* (1793). Despite their free-thinking ways, Wollstonecraft and Godwin were wed five months prior to their daughter's birth. Mary's birth was difficult. Her mother became ill and died ten days later.

Concerned with Mary's welfare, Godwin courted numerous women, intent upon finding for her a suitable mother. On December 21, 1801, Godwin married Mary Jane Clairmont. She had two children of her own, six-year-old Charles and four-year-old Jane (later called Claire). The marriage was flawed by money problems and lifelong friction between Mary and her stepmother. Mary came to idealize her natural mother, whose works she read avidly. Though not a literary person, the new Mrs. Godwin did possess business sense, encouraging Godwin to become a publisher. Godwin's vocation and reputation as a man of letters

granted Mary valuable exposure to such literary giants as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Despite being deprived of the formal education that her natural mother would have wished for her, Mary thus became deeply acquainted with the literary and philosophical issues of her day.

Mary's intellectual development did not make her relationship with her stepmother any more cordial. Distance was required, and Mary did manage to get away from the household, most notably living in Dundee, Scotland, from 1812 to 1814, with the relatively conventional Baxter family. Mary's imagination soared in the ruggedly beautiful Scottish countryside, and life with the Baxters proved to be a revelation.

Visiting her father in November, 1812, Mary had met Percy Bysshe Shelley for the first time. An as yet unknown poet, Percy Shelley was drawn to William Godwin by the latter's radicalism. Indeed, Percy took some of Godwin's ideas more seriously than Godwin himself. Not unrelated to this was Percy's whirlwind courtship of Mary upon her permanent return from Scotland in May of 1814. Godwin was not pleased. Percy was already married, albeit unhappily, and, in Godwin's eyes, Mary was prohibitively young. The two lovers remained unswayed by Godwin's opinion and ran off on July 28.

The relationship was both deeply romantic and somewhat bizarre. The young couple went to Europe, ready to live on love, and sometimes having to do just that. Percy and Mary became true soul mates, sharing abundant enthusiasm for literature and ideas. On the other hand, the two were not

alone. Mary's half sister Claire (formerly Jane) accompanied them. Just why she did so is not clear, but the fact that the three were so often together ultimately raised scandalous rumors. In addition, Mary often was agitated by Claire's presence. She thought Claire wished to compete for Percy's attention.

Plagued by money woes, the trio returned to England in September, 1814. In February, 1815, Mary gave birth to a daughter, the first of her four offspring with Shelley. Unfortunately, the baby died two weeks later. The following January (1816) saw the successful birth of a son, William. That May, under pressure from creditors and again accompanied by Claire, Mary and Shelley returned to Europe, this time residing in Switzerland. At this point, they made the acquaintance of Lord Byron, already a celebrated poet. It was after an evening of reading ghost stories at Byron's mansion that Mary first conceived the plot of *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). In addition, Byron and Claire became lovers, though definitely not soul mates.

The Shelleys returned to England at the end of August. In December, Percy Shelley's wife, Harriet, apparently committed suicide, as did Mary's half sister Fanny, who was in love with Percy. At least partly in order to gain custody of his children by Harriet, Shelley married Mary on December 30, 1816. (The attempt to gain custody was, however, unsuccessful.) In 1817, Mary finished *Frankenstein*, gave birth to a daughter, Clara Everina, and published her *History of a Six Weeks' Tour Through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland* (1817), a journal of her European travels.

On March 11, 1818, *Frankenstein* was published and the Shelleys departed on a third European odyssey. In September, Clara died after a brief illness. William, who so far had lived the longest, contracted malaria and followed her to the grave the next June. This last death was an especially tough one for Mary. She continued to work during this period, however, researching her second novel, *Valperga: Or, The Life of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca* (1823), and beginning preliminary work on *Mathilda*, published posthumously in 1959.

On November 12, 1819, Mary gave birth to Percy Florence, the only one of her children who would live to adulthood. The Shelleys continued to live in Italy, visited by a gallery of friends and

literary figures. Sadness, however, once again overshadowed the Shelley household. In June, Mary suffered a miscarriage that might have been fatal if not for quick action by Percy. Then, in July, Percy and a friend died in a boating accident. Mary's magical liaison with the poet had ended.

Mary was now a widow. More than that, she was the great Shelley's widow, expected by some very different sorts of people to be faithful keeper of the flame. Returning to England, she did this rather skillfully. According to the wishes of her father-in-law, Timothy Shelley, upon whom she depended for income, she withheld publication of her biography of Shelley. She did, however, produce valuable annotated editions of Shelley's poetry and prose. She also continued to write prolifically on her own, supplementing her income and giving vent to her considerable creative and analytic energies. Over the last twenty-five years of her life, she published four novels—*The Last Man* (1826), *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (1830), *Lodore* (1835), and *Falkner* (1837)—and found time to produce a revised version of *Frankenstein* (1831). She also published a travelogue, *Rambles in Germany and Italy* (1844), numerous short pieces (mostly stories, but occasionally poems and incidental nonfiction), and was a busy contributor to the biographical volumes of *Lardner's Cabinet Encyclopedia*.

In addition to financial pressures, Mary's later life was plagued by blackmail attempts and a falling out with most of her friends. She was helped through these troubled times by her son Percy. As a man of ideas, Percy was a disappointment to Mary. She came to appreciate, however, his loyalty and quiet affection. When Percy married in 1848, his wife also became a faithful companion to Mary. Spurned by the pretentious literary and social world in which she had never quite felt comfortable, Mary was sustained by the warmth of family ties. She died, after a series of strokes, on February 1, 1851, at Chester Square, London, and was laid to rest in St. Peter's Churchyard, Bournemouth, England, between her illustrious parents.

ANALYSIS

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley produced a multitude of correspondence, novels, and other sundry works. Criticizing her work as a whole is difficult for a number of reasons. First, the range of her work—from historical romance (*The Fortunes of*

Perkin Warbeck) to horror (*Frankenstein*) and futuristic tragedy (*The Last Man*)—is extremely broad. No two of Shelley's novels are of precisely the same genre. Second, she does not fit neatly into the literary categories of her time. Though *Frankenstein* is sometimes mistaken for a gothic novel, it eschews that genre's love of the supernatural and is uncharacteristically cerebral. Finally, literary analysis of her work as a whole is still at a relatively underdeveloped stage.

Despite these problems, several common threads emerge as basic to Shelley's work. The first of these has to do with style. For her time, Shelley was a highly economical and dispassionate writer. Her works are rarely overwhelmed with weighty details or convoluted language. On the other hand, she often sacrificed characterization and plot for the sake of narrative flow.

Thematically, Shelley's work is characterized by a strong autobiographical tendency, a consistent concern with the apparent and real nature of family life, and a sophisticated treatment of larger philosophical and social questions. The geographical settings of Shelley's novels reflected her own travels, and many of the characters in her later novels, especially, were said to be based on literary celebrities whom she had known. In *The Last Man*, for example, Shelley herself is represented by both Lionel Verney (the narrator and "last man" of the title) and his sister Perdita. The utopian Adrian would seem to be modeled after Percy Bysshe Shelley, while the egotistic Lord Raymond represents Lord Byron. Shelley's penchant for basing her fiction on real-life models is probably best illustrated by *Mathilda*. In this tale, a young woman resembling Shelley herself experiences an incestuous relationship with her father and is saved from her own guilty depression by a young man again resembling Percy Bysshe Shelley. That the novel was suppressed, partly by Shelley and partly by her father, is an indication not that such an incestuous relationship took place but that Shelley's readers were conditioned to see her work as autobiographical in a more literal way than she or her father wished.

As the topic of incest suggests, Shelley often treated the question of family ties in greater depth than was usual for her time. No doubt this reflected her own disappointments in this regard. Birth and death were inextricably linked for Shelley.

Her own birth had resulted in the death of her mother, and she had lost three of her own children in infancy. In addition, her husband had died while still a young man, and her father was distant, distracted at different points in his life by Shelley's stepmother and by persistent money problems. These concerns are reflected in a number of Shelley's novels—perhaps, in one way or another, in all of them. *Lodore*, for example, presents the story of a mother who sacrifices everything for her daughter, arriving at the conclusion that all of life's rewards are illusory except for the honest affection felt for a loved one. In *Falkner*, Shelley provides an apology for her husband's first marriage, attempting to absolve him of the blame for Harriet's suicide.

Shelley's concerns were not limited to real and ideal versions of hearth and home. She could apply her art to a much broader canvas—to the formation of the English monarchy in *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* or to the future of the human race in *The Last Man*. Set in the twenty-first century, the latter novel presents an image of broad social progress. Yet all is not well in the world. Freedom has not quashed the seeds of conflict in human nature. The use of a new weapon lets loose a tragic plague, one that ultimately brings an end to the human race. Shelley describes a future in which humanity's moral progress lags sadly behind its technological capacity for destruction.

FRANKENSTEIN

First published: 1818

Type of work: Novel

A young scientist discovers the secret of animating dead tissue, with hideous consequences.

Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus is the work for which Shelley is remembered by the general public. The story unfolds in a series of letters from Robert Walton, an enterprising arctic explorer, to his sister in England. Walton reports the sighting of a giant manlike creature driving a dog-sled in the icy distance. This scene is followed by the rescue of a man whose sled had become

stranded in the ice floe. This man is Victor Frankenstein.

As he recovers his health, Frankenstein relates his story. He tells of his warm family life in Geneva and of his early enthusiasm for the speculative natural philosophy of alchemists such as Cornelius Agrippa. At the age of twenty-one, he leaves to study science at Ingolstadt. There, he learns the difference between modern science and mysticism. He embraces scientific method but holds onto one of the dreams of his former models—the creation of life. Ultimately, he completely embraces this goal, assembling a being of huge scale in order to simplify its construction. When his creature gains life, Frankenstein is instantly revolted. He exits the flat and wanders about, hoping that the spark of life in the creature will expire spontaneously. The following day, the creature has disappeared, and Victor is visited by his best friend, Henry Clerval, who, unaware of the creature's existence, helps Victor to regain his composure over the next several months. In early May, Victor's younger brother William is murdered outside Geneva. A servant is accused of the crime. Upon his return home, Victor catches a brief sight of the creature, whose existence has nearly slipped Victor's mind. He senses that the creature is responsible for his brother's murder, but he remains silent as the servant is convicted of the crime. After the trial, while vacationing in the Alps, Victor meets the creature on a glacier. There, he learns of the creature's cruel rejection by humankind, its self-education (the creature is easily the most articulate character in the book), and its subsequent revenge on its creator. Though the creature did indeed murder William, Victor is torn between hatred and sympathy. Reluctantly, he agrees to animate a female companion for the creature.

After months of indecision, Victor retires to the Orkney Islands (north of Scotland) to begin the work that he has promised. Midway through, in sight of the creature himself, he becomes fearful of the havoc that might be caused by a race of such fiends. He destroys the lifeless torso over which he stands. The creature vows to be with Victor on Victor's wedding night (he is engaged to a cousin) and departs. After murdering Victor's friend Clerval, a crime of which Victor is briefly accused, the creature disappears. Victor is wed in Geneva and awaits his confrontation with the crea-

ture. Instead, the creature slips into his bedroom, murders his bride, and escapes. Finally, Victor goes to the authorities. Finding no hope there, he pursues the creature himself, winding up on Walton's ship. There, he dies from the exhaustion of the hunt. The novel closes with a visit to Walton's ship by the creature. The creature laments the death of his creator and departs, vowing to take his own life.

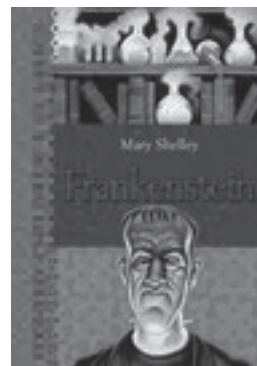
As is clear, Shelley's novel is not quite the grave-robbing horror story associated with the original Hollywood version starring Boris Karloff. Instead, the book exemplifies all the characteristics of Shelley's work noted previously. Stylistically, Shelley moves the narrative along at a rapid pace, avoiding weighty details or intricate plotting. The result is a book that is easily read and in which the geographic settings are striking, in part because they have so little with which to compete in the way of description. On the other hand, there is only one well-realized character, the creature himself, which, in this case, happens to be enough. In addition, *Frankenstein* is—to put it frankly—hopelessly contrived, with coincidence appearing as a law of

nature. Indeed, one reason for the distortions of the film and dramatic versions of the story has been the need for a narrative that makes a little more sense than the novel does when held up to critical scrutiny.

Frankenstein is also autobiographical. For one thing, with the exception of the arctic wastelands, the book's geographic settings come right out

of the author's various travels. For another, the creature's reading list, including John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674) and Plutarch's *Bioi paralleloi* (c. 105-115 C.E.; *Parallel Lives*, 1579), closely mirror Shelley's own reading fare at the time that she wrote the novel. On a more profound level, the novel reflects Shelley's experience with the traumas of birth and rejection.

This discussion raises the issue of family. Victor Frankenstein turns his back on an idyllic family life in favor of an unsavory scientific quest. Yet the



creature aches for the nurturing affection and guidance that can be provided by a loving family. Finally, the novel can be seen as a tale of what happens when women are omitted from the process of procreation. The result is a creature who is unnatural and unloved. This last omission is the direct cause of the creature's hideous crimes.

Larger philosophical themes also abound in *Frankenstein*. One might begin with the reference to Prometheus in the subtitle and the references to *Paradise Lost* in the text. Prometheus is best known as the mythic figure who stole the secret of fire from the gods and gave it to humanity, an act for which he was severely punished. This association suggests that Victor is a victim of his own hubris in seeking the divine power of creation. Less well known is the myth in which Prometheus creates the human race, providing a clear parallel with Victor. Milton's work poetically examines the fall from grace in Eden according to the Old Testament. Frankenstein's creature expressly compares himself to Adam. In this case, paradise is not

lost; it was never part of the bargain according to Victor's foggy conception of his task.

Frankenstein also suggests the dangers of amoral science or unrestrained rationality, the imperfection of civil justice, and the superficiality of human judgment. It is perhaps most basically a book about the concurrent limits and limitlessness of human nature and human knowledge. It encourages one to remember that the power to create may produce consequences that cannot be foreseen or controlled.

SUMMARY

While Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* myth has become a caricature in the public mind, her novel stands up well across the centuries. Moreover, Shelley's other works are emerging from obscurity. In the twenty-first century, Shelley's vision of the then-distant future in *The Last Man* should continue to gather new readers.

Ira Smolensky and Marjorie Smolensky

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DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Does Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's literary work reflect her mother's preoccupations?
- Why is Shelley's *Frankenstein* the only gothic romance that has found a considerable reading audience in recent decades?
- What makes *Frankenstein* different from typical gothic romances of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?
- Has *Frankenstein's* influence on modern horror writers been unfortunate?
- Does *Frankenstein* raise questions similar to issues now raised by stem cell research?

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