



# Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus

by Mary Shelley

## Content Synopsis

The story of Victor Frankenstein and his creation is told entirely via letters Robert Walton, the frame narrator, sends his sister during a sea voyage to the North Pole, in search of glory. Thirsty for fame, Walton serves as one of several characters whose life, desires or aspirations parallel Victor's. While trapped in the ice, the crew of Walton's ship encounters both a looming figure in the distance on a sledge and a second man who approaches the trapped vessel, also on a sledge, seeking refuge. The second man is Victor Frankenstein, who is rescued by Walton and his crew. The first figure is his "creature." As he slowly recovers on the boat, Victor bonds with Walton and shares his story from beginning to end.

Victor's story begins in Geneva where he was raised with an adopted sister (Elizabeth) who later becomes his love interest. After leaving home to study chemistry and natural philosophy at Ingolstadt University in Germany, Victor studies under M. Krempe and M. Waldman who shape his philosophical education. Eventually, almost by accident, by combining both abandoned and new beliefs about science, Victor discovers the secrets of life and death. The knowledge prompts him to reanimate a corpse, an act of which he never logically considers the result, including the fate of the 'creation' he animates. At first exultant at his success, Victor is soon both disgusted and fearful of

his monstrous creation. After seeking his friend Clerval, the two find that the monster has escaped the laboratory and is at large. Victor falls ill and returns to his family at which time his younger brother is found murdered and Justine, an adopted member of the household, is convicted of the crime. Although Victor suspects that his monster killed William, he does not speak up in Justine's defense and she is executed.

The monster, alone and outcast from society, manages to stay alive by hiding in a lean-to adjacent to a cottage, where he begins to learn to speak and read by watching the family through a chink in the wall. Some of his early reading material includes Plutarch's "Lives," "Sorrows of Young Werther," and most significantly, "Paradise Lost," the text with which he most identifies and which is the generative force behind his desire for an Eve. He is forced to flee the family once they see him in all his monstrous glory, even though he has provided necessary goods to them like firewood.

While walking in the mountains some time later, Victor is confronted by his creation who, lonely, frustrated, and abandoned by his maker, explains that he killed William in an effort to get back at Victor. The monster asks only one thing of Victor—that he create a mate with whom he may spend the rest of his miserable days, an Eve to his Adam; one like himself, monstrous and outcast. During his plea to Victor, the monster is ironically

characterized as both more human and more civilized than his maker is. He is both convincing and eloquent in his arguments.

The idea of isolation, imposed by self or society, is extended as Victor agrees to the monster's request, and goes into seclusion to recreate his first experiment and make the creature a wife. While Victor slaves to recreate his first experiment, he suddenly realizes that if he creates a female for the creature, they might breed a monstrous race together. As a result, he destroys the female he is in the process of reanimating. The monster watches Victor's actions from a window and rages at the betrayal, taking revenge by murdering Victor's future bride, Elizabeth. Victor's father then dies of grief over Elizabeth's murder. By the end of the tale, the civilized scientist Victor Frankenstein has been indirectly responsible for the death of almost every character in the book.

As Victor becomes obsessed with exacting retribution for Elizabeth's murder, both characters appear more parallel than ever, each one vowing revenge over the destruction of their love. After several thwarted attempts to capture the monster, Victor finally tracks him north where he runs into Walton and his crew. Ironically, because Victor endowed his creation with incredible strength, he is easily able to outstrip Victor who falls ill. Victor becomes progressively sicker, and dies on Walton's boat after finishing his story. The monster comes to see Victor's dead body over which he weeps and then decides that he can die, as he has no partner and nothing left upon which to take revenge.

The idea that the monster and the scientist are "antithetical halves of the same being" (Bloom 1) is a concept firmly established in literary criticism from the publication of Shelley's most famous work through the present day. Another parallel exists between Walton and Victor, one of whom attempts to tame nature by penetrating it via exploration and the other through usurping its power. Some of the themes Frankenstein addresses include

the monstrous potential of human creative power when severed from moral and social concerns, the power of nature versus science, the responsibility of society towards those it treats poorly, relationships between men and women, and the idea that one can be both moral and destructive at the same time.

### Historical Context

In the summer of 1816, Mary Shelley and a group of friends, including her husband Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, Claire Claremont, and John Polidori, vacationed on Lake Geneva at Villa Deodati. Because of inclement weather, they spent a significant portion of their stay reading. The majority of this reading material was comprised of ghost stories. One stormy night, Byron challenged each member of the group to write a supernatural story to share. While most of them tried, only Mary and John ultimately kept with it, each publishing their results: Shelley's "Frankenstein" and Polidori's "The Vampyre." Mary was not yet twenty when she wrote the story.

This novel is characterized as both Romantic and Gothic. Gothic literature arose following the 1764 publication of Horace Walpole's "The Castle of Otranto." Some of the characteristics of this type of fiction include the dark, the mysterious, and the supernatural. The text also represents the ideas of literary Romanticism in which "the shadow or double of the self is a constant conceptual image" (Bloom 2).

In many ways, Frankenstein reflects the frustration and disillusionment felt in the wake of the French Revolution, which was initially supported by most, if not all, Romantic writers. At the outset, the French revolution was lauded by those who stood in opposition to oppression and identified with struggle of the lower and working class. The turn of events at the end of the revolution, however, soured even its staunchest supporters. According to George Levine, the "metaphoric" nature of the

tale addresses “some of the fundamental dualisms, the social, moral political and metaphysical crisis of western history since the French Revolution” (Schoene-Harwood 21).

### **Societal Context**

The social outcast is a figure explored in depth in this story. Outcasts and their dangerous potential to disrupt the very social order that relegated them to the fringes have been explored since the time of Beowulf’s Grendel. In Shelley’s story, both Frankenstein and his monster suffer the effects of being cast out of society either by choice or by compulsion. The impact of outward appearance on social reception is greatly emphasized in the text, from the physical attractiveness, or lack thereof, of Victor’s teachers at Ingolstadt, to the reactions to the creature in civilized society. The dangers of social maltreatment in the text were explored by Percy Shelley himself who stated, “Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked . . . divide him, a social being, from society, and you impose upon him the irresistible obligations—malevolence and selfishness” (Schoene-Harwood).

A long-standing debate among sociologists, the question of whether nature or nurture is the primary influence on personality development is addressed within the text, but never satisfactorily or definitively answered. Rousseau’s theories about human intellectual potential are visible in the creature who is clearly a “tabula rasa,” or blank slate, when he comes into existence and whose worldview is influenced primarily by his education.

The creature is a good “man,” as far as one can tell, until he is treated unfairly and poorly by members of society. The people the creature encounters, however, only react because of ingrained social norms, customs, and fears. Thus, they both are and are not truly culpable for the creature’s turn to monstrous doings. It is the creature’s “father” himself who is primarily responsible for his life and well-being, and it is his “father” who abandons him. The

dangerous, often fatal, effects of abandonment and orphan hood are subjects close to Mary Shelley’s heart. Making this point more emphatically, in “Frankenstein,” as Gilbert and Gubar point out, “all the major and most of the minor characters in “Frankenstein” are [orphans]” including Victor, Walton, Elizabeth, and Justine (55).

The lack of power women possessed during the time in which the story is set is exemplified in the characters of Justine and Elizabeth, each of whom relies upon male intervention and agency to save them. Margaret, Walton’s sister, clearly takes issue with some of his decisions, yet is never given her own voice with which to do so.

Malchow suggests that Shelley’s text not only engages with revolutionary and gendered experiences, but also with “contemporary attitudes toward nonwhites.” Malchow illustrates that it is possible to see the monster as a representation of racism in action. Malchow begins his argument by exploring the ways in which the creature is described physically, citing his complexion, size, strength and his “apelike” ability to scamper up mountainsides and his endurance of temperatures that European man would find intolerable” (18–19). Mary Shelley wrote her text after the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807. In opposition to the still prevalent racist ideology of her time, Shelley’s creature is “different,” “uncivilized” and vilified as Other in the text, but he quickly learns and “evolves” before the very eyes of the reader, eventually becoming, arguably more civilized than the master of his fate, Victor.

### **Religious Context**

Both mythic and Biblical references appear in the story. Prometheus is seen by Harold Bloom as “the mythic figure who best suits the uses of Romantic poetry, for no other traditional being has in him the full range of Romantic moral sensibility and the full Romantic capacity for creation and destruction” (Bloom 2). Prometheus can also be seen as

representative of the Biblical Lucifer who was cast out of heaven. Harold Bloom notes, however, there is a resemblance between the protagonist of Shelley's novel and the protagonist of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "The Ancient Mariner." According to Bloom, "Coleridge's Mariner is of the line of Cain, and the irony of Frankenstein's fate is that he too is a Cain, involuntarily murdering all his loved ones through the agency of his creature" (6). Lowrey Nelson Jr. asserts that one important dimension of the rise of Gothic writing and Romantic sensibility, was that it precipitated a "trans-valuation of values [in which] Cain becomes a sympathetic figure, unjustly cursed by a vengeful God and incapable of ever purging his guilt . . . at worst he is twisted by circumstances into a monster of inhumanity" (32).

In the story itself, Victor is a man over whom religion seems to hold no sway. He, in fact, actively seeks to become a God, to create life, perhaps to live forever. In a reading in which Victor stands as an uncaring and abandoning "father," he would symbolize that God which people believe created man only to leave him to his own devices, the result of which is, in many people, though certainly not all, a murderous and vengeful instinct.

### Scientific & Technological Context

The text's exploration of the relationship between nature and science is exemplified in a conversation Victor has with Walton, warning him: "Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than who aspires to be greater than his nature will allow" (833).

The possibility of a birthing process taken over by men, which is arguably, at least partly a reflection of the increase in male physicians' interest in women and birthing, duties that had previously been performed only by midwives, is explored in "Frankenstein." Scientific [and/or medical] study

devoid of women's research and involvement is shown to yield terrible results in this text, as much as the literary texts exploring this idea today.

The text engages with some of the more specious sciences of the day, including the writing of Cornelius Agrippa who believed that God and the universe could be understood via magic. Paracelsus is also a man Victor studies, an alchemist; he represents the scientific theory falling out of favor at the time. The combination in Victor's courses of study, of both magical and 'scientific' theory proves fruitful, if dangerous.

### Biographical Context

Mary Shelley was born in 1797, the daughter of writer and social activist William Godwin and early women's rights supporter Mary Wollstonecraft. Surrounded by intellectuals, Mary Shelley received a thorough, if private, education from reading books found in the vast library at her home, an education not unlike that of Victor's creature.

In 1813, Mary ran away with the then married Percy Bysshe Shelley. The relationship was turbulent for years, and resulted in marriage, only after Percy's wife's suicide. Mary Shelley's life was a very difficult one, fraught with issues about paternity, the dangers of illegitimacy, and the conflation in her mind of love and death. Some examples of this include: her own mother's death shortly after giving birth to her; Mary and Percy having their first intimate encounter at her mother's grave; the deaths of five out of six of her children; her sister Fanny's suicide after finding out that she was illegitimate; Percy's (pregnant) first wife's suicide after he left her; and Mary's own brush with death after a miscarriage in 1822. Mary was also pregnant at the time of her writing "Frankenstein." Referred to by her as "my hideous progeny" this book was the second of Mary's "children" to not only survive but also reach near immortal status.

After her husband Percy's untimely death on 1822, (by drowning) his body was cremated.

According to witnesses, the heart would not burn. First removed from the flames by a friend of Percy, his heart was then given to Mary who kept it with her until the day she died, when it was buried with her.

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### Discussion Questions

1. What makes this an enduring tale?
2. Why are there so many revisions of this story? It has inspired over 50 films.
3. What is the effect on you as a reader of the narrative layers? For example, are you always aware of how the narrative voice shifts, or becomes more complicated? At one point in particular, the reader hears from Walton's sister something from Walton that came from Victor and originated with the 'monster.' The telling, however, is often so seamless that the reader misses the layers of subjectivity. Does this matter? Do you think Shelley is just making a point about the importance and pervasiveness of storytelling, or is she commenting on the bias of any/every narrative perspective?
4. Think about and discuss, what each major 'teller' has to gain in his or her 'version' of the truth? [Walton, Victor, the Monster] How does this influence their ability to be objective? Have you ever experienced the problem of providing an objective description of something about which you have strong feelings?
5. While the text overtly vilifies men (in particular scientists), in what ways are women subtly made scapegoats in the text? Why do you think Mary makes this choice? Was she reflecting concerns of the day or making some other commentary?
6. Who do you feel is the "true" monster, Victor, his creation or both? Why?
7. One of the allusions in the text is a biblical one, referring to the story of the creation and fall of Man leading to the loss of paradise. How do these themes resonate with and repeat in the text? Which character is most aligned with God/ With Satan? Does this change? What commentary is Shelley making on the Human construction of understanding good and evil based on textual learning alone (versus experience)?
8. Another allusion is to the Myth of Prometheus. Prometheus created man out of clay and went against the Gods by giving Man fire to elevate civilization. The Gods, unhappy with the elevated status of mortals, punished Prometheus for all eternity. The subtitle for this text is, *A Modern Prometheus*. Victor clearly is the parallel character when comparing the myth and the story by Shelley. Do you think the 'moral' of each is the same or different? Is Victor punished for all eternity as well? What would be the equivalent of our Modern Day Prometheus? Would it be a scientist? A Political figure? Religious figure?
9. One of the important repeated 'figures' is that of the Outcast. Name the many outcasts in the story—and the circumstances around their isolation. Which have 'chosen' outcast status? Which have it thrust upon them?
10. The following characters are often seen as 'parallels' or 'foils.' Discuss what each pair has in common: Walton/Victor; Victor/Creature; Elizabeth/Creature; Victor/Eve/Pandora; Creature/Adam/Satan.

### Essay Ideas

1. Research and explore the importance of Milton's "Paradise Lost" on this text.
2. Analyze the role of religion and science in the story. In what ways are they at odds? In what ways are they complementary?
3. Compare the following characters as foils for one another: Walton/Victor; Victor/Creature; Elizabeth/Creature; Victor/Eve/Pandora; Creature/Adam/Satan.
4. Compare the text of Frankenstein with one or more film adaptations, studying the alterations made to the original tale. Explore whether or not the changes reflect socio/historical shifts in cultures at the time.
5. Argue the theory that "Frankenstein" and his creature are both parts of the same personality. What traits do they share in common? When combined would they make a more 'complete' human? Is Victor exiling the creature in order to exile the parts of himself he does not like?

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