

# Use of structure in *Frankenstein*

The structure of a text refers to the way in which events are organised inside the novel as a whole. The most commonly used structure in novels is chronological, where events are told to the reader in the order in which they have happened. However, the structure of *Frankenstein* is much more complex as Mary Shelley uses a technique called embedded narrative. In an embedded narrative, the main story is told within a framing narrative (think of a painting in a frame which makes up the whole picture). In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley starts with a framing narrative (Walton's letters to his sister), before moving to the main narrative (Victor's story) and then contained within this is the Monster's story of survival and how he learns from the De Lacey family.

There are three separate narrators. As readers, we learn directly about Robert Walton's expedition in his own words. He then meets Victor Frankenstein and his narrative is told to us through the letters which Robert Walton is writing to his sister. Finally, we hear the Monster's account of his development, but this is conveyed to us by Victor, which is in turn told to Walton who is telling it both to his sister and to us as readers. The novel then returns to Victor's point of view and then finally to Walton's framing narrative. This is complicated and very clever!

## Why does Mary Shelley do this?

By using such a complex narrative structure, Mary Shelley is able to lead the reader gradually to the central ideas of the novel which, if introduced suddenly, might be dismissed as being beyond belief. By the time we get to the Monster's story in its own words, we are ready to believe that not only can it speak but that it can argue in a logical and rational manner.

Shelley also uses the three varied narrative perspectives to highlight the themes of the novel from a number of different viewpoints.

Finally we may, of course, not entirely trust what we are being told by any one particular individual (a risk-taking explorer with a one-track mind, a sometimes mad scientist who breaks nature's laws and a hideously deformed and murderous Monster). In this way, the reader becomes like a scientist trying to piece together the evidence in order to get at the truth.

## Examining structure

Examining structure in a text can also refer to looking at the writer's deliberate arrangement of sentences and paragraphs. This is known as syntax. Here is an example of how such a piece of text might be analysed:

Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant, but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was, besides, endued with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they and could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded theirs. When I looked around I saw and heard of none like me. Was

I, then, a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled and whom all men disowned?**The Monster**

- In this extract, the Monster reflects on its origins. While we might expect what it says to be unsophisticated, the Monster shows a command of language that is, perhaps, stronger than any other character in the novel.
- The sentences used are complex and full of subclauses which highlight the Monster's power with words.
- Much use is made of semicolons to help the readability of the complex sentences.
- The 'rule of three' is used (no money, no friends, no kind of property) to make the Monster's argument more memorable.
- At the end of this passage, a rhetorical question is used, which invites the listener (in this case Victor and therefore Walton) and the reader (us) to agree with the argument.