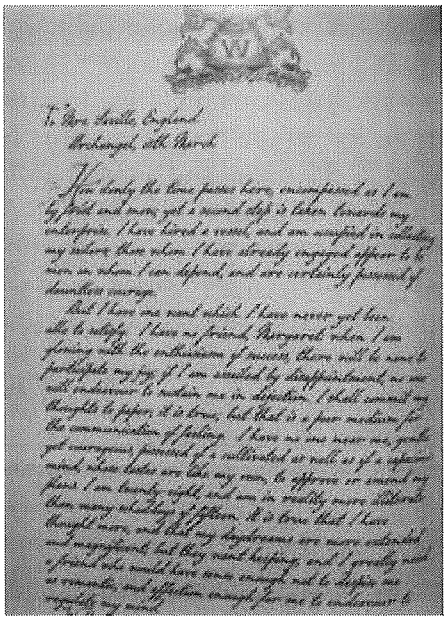
Frame Narratives



Excerpt from Walton's letters in Gris Grimly's graphic novel *Frankenstein*. Volume 1: Letter 1.

Frame narratives, as exemplified by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*,were popularly used in nineteenth century English literature to introduce multiple characters and perspectives. This literary device was a layered narrative that featured a story within story, at times within yet another story. Dino Felluga remarks that form operates by "[echoing] in structure the thematic search . . . something deep, dark, and secret at the heart of the narrative" (Purdue). In the case of *Frankenstein*, this search extends to the hearts of the characters directing the frame as well. Shelley models the framing in her novel after that used in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in which the character in the outer frame of the novel receives a story through the inner frame and must carry this story on with him, thus amplifying the moral lesson of the tale. Similarly, the main frame of Shelley's novel is Captain Walton's letters to his sister Margaret Saville, and it is within these letters that the two inner frames told respectively by Victor Frankenstein and the Creature emerge. This structure leaves Walton as "the bearer of a tale of unnatural wisdom" but also ironically as the one who directs the reader's perception of that wisdom (Brooks 604). The individual frames of the narrative lead the reader to view the characters in the way dictated by the teller and bring into question the notion of authorial honesty. Felluga reminds us in his definition of the frame narrative that "the teller of the story becomes an actual character with concomitant shortcomings, limitations, prejudices, and motives" (Purdue).Shelley plays with this notion through the utilization of three frame narratives that at times contradict each other's perspectives yet work together not only to incite a deeper, more complex understanding of the characters but also to call into question how much one can or should know.

Contents

Victor (left), the Creature (middle), and Captain Walton (right) shown in tandem from Trevor Allen's 2009 stage adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Source: https://thecreature.wordpress.com/

Captain Walton is the narrator of the epistolary frame through which *Frankenstein* is told. It is in his letters that Frankenstein and the Creature tell their stories and through which these stories purportedly gain their fame. The title character of Shelley's work, Victor Frankenstein, narrates the second frame and tells of his "misfortunes" in creating the Creature who narrates the third and most interior frame (Shelley 19). Frankenstein observes that Walton "[seeks] for knowledge and wisdom just as I [Victor] did," linking the two in purpose and placing Walton into the position of a listener who is to receive a moral (Shelley 18). The similarities between Victor and Walton connect the first two frames while the Creature's tale blurs the lines between the monstrosity of the Creature and that of his Creator in the third frame. The individual stories of these characters both physically and metaphorically mesh together to create a master narrative guided by the implications and consequences that Walton must confront and connect in his letters.

Major Scenes

Victor's Representation of Reform and Walton's Contradiction

The contrast between the way in which Victor frames the end of his tale and the last burst of spirit that Victor enacts in Walton's frame illustrates the effectiveness of the frame narrative in creating a complicated reading of the novel's characters and determining truth. During his petition to the magistrate to search for

and destroy his creature, Victor publicly states that he was the one to "[turn the monster] loose upon society" and takes it upon himself to correct this mistake by "[devoting himself], either in [his] life or death, to his [the monster's] destruction" (Shelley 164-165). This shift from Victor's previous refusal to "[confess himself] guilty" of the first of the Creature's murders because supposedly this confession "would have been considered as the ravings of a madman" appears to indicate a shift in understanding as well (Shelley 62). In this scene Victor reports his final misfortunes with an acknowledgement of the wrong he has committed, as expressed both by his personal conviction to correct his mistakes and through his acknowledging use of the pronoun "I" and the active voice in establishing the source of the monster's existence in society (165). This self-deprecating tone matches the spirited, firm commitment to revenge to produce an image of Victor that indicates not only that he has "learned his lesson," so to speak, but also that he intends his story to be used as a cautionary tale. Victor's reform

Captain Walton presents a contrasting view of Victor in his final letters. Though Victor would have the reader believe in his reformed state and uses his narrative to defend this state, Walton records Frankenstein's passionate appeal to Walton's crew, berating them for "[shrinking] away" and being willing to abandon the "glorious expedition" that Walton has undertaken (Shelley 177). This encouragement of ambition and the search for knowledge at the risk of "danger and death" indicates that Victor has not truly been reformed, a fact that is further emphasized by Walton's connection of this impassioned speech to its effect on Victor. His outburst causes him to fall into "languor" and be "almost deprived of life," this relationship indicating the detrimental effects of the ambition that Victor supports and providing a greater, more evident moral than what Victor could create through his own faulty, self-protective narrative (177; 179). Walton's frame provides a different view of Victor, a view that calls into question his perceptions of himself and the hubris he has committed as well as his perceptions of his own Creature and the narrative which he has just imparted.

Walton Confronts the Creature After Victor's Death

Parental responsibility

The frames of Mary Shelley's narrative are not firm, as the Creature's intrusion into the main frame at the end of the novel illustrates, but rather act as sources through which to judge the validity of the individual narratives and establish a connection to the themes expressed in the novel as a whole. Walton himself says that the supplemental letters that Victor provided and the sight of the monster in the distance "brought to me a greater conviction of the truth of his narrative than his [Victor's] asseveration," suggesting that the lines between reality and fiction of Victor's narrative in particular seem blurred when judging from the story alone (Shelley 172). However, when the Creature, Walton, and the body of Victor are physically present together in the main frame, Walton sees, finally, the reality of Victor's tale as well as the prejudice and fault that marks it. Walton's first reaction to the Creature, especially once the Creature verbalizes his "repentance," is one of "a mixture of curiosity and compassion" that is only broken when Walton "[calls] to mind what Frankenstein had said of his [the Creature's] powers of eloquence and persuasion" (182-183). The conflict of interests that Walton experiences in this moment expresses also the tension created by the two frames that Victor and the Creature control, one suggesting the Creature's monstrosity and the other his humanity. Walton, as the director of the main narrative, must confront and decide the veracity of each in this final moment, and his decision forms the basis for the reader's interpretation of *Frankenstein* as a whole. Despite the promise that he makes to Victor, Walton allows the creature to "[spring] from the cabin-window" and be "borne away by the waves" (186). This decision appears to favor the Creature's frame and rhetoric over Victor's, suggesting that Walton believes that the Creature truly will "ascend [his] funeral pile triumphantly" and remove himself from the world (186). However, this conclusion limits the power of the frame to itself form a conclusion for the narrative and ignores the symbolism of this moment. Because the Creature breaks into the frame of Walton's narrative, causing him to be "interrupted," Walton's ambition also appears to be interrupted. For the very reason that he is able to confront the monstrous Creature that Frankenstein had created as a result of his uncontrolled ambition and thirst for knowledge, Walton sees firsthand the disastrous outcomes of this pursuit (Shelley 181). Walton's position as the narrator of the main frame allows him to step back from the other narratives after delving deeply into them—both literally in terms of the book's narrative structure and metaphorically in terms of his personal decisions—and depart from Victor's course. Instead of pursuing Victor's monster either to embrace or destroy it in this final scene, Walton returns to his home and leaves the monster and everything he represents behind.

Impact in/for *Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley's frame narrative pieces together the individual perspectives and voices of her characters to create a master narrative that displays the fluidity and complexity of the characters, plot, and themes she develops. In this way, Shelley's novel is itself a stitched together creation, a "monstrous progeny" of its own (Shelley 192, from the 1831 *Introduction*). Some researchers like Criscillia Benford suggest that the three frames in Shelley's novel offer an analysis of government while others suggest that they form a model of the debate surrounding education or represent a moral move away from the hubris embodied in Victor Frankenstein. The truth of the matter is that the frame narrative as a literary device offers all of these options to the narrative because it allows for the exploration of three different points of view and interior thoughts. Shelley's framing of *Frankenstein* allows for this deep exploration of themes because these frames put the similarities between the characters in conversation and suggests the threat of the narrator of the fluid, directing frame giving into the influences or vices of the more temporally fixed, interior frames. As the dominant frame, Walton's narrative is the one that makes it back to the domestic, civilized sphere and thus assures the continuation of the Frankenstein story while also suggesting that this story can persist only because Walton did not fall into the same trap as Victor Frankenstein, thus elucidating themes of the preference of domesticity and human connection over the hubris of ambition, isolation, and the unrestricted search for knowledge. At the same time, one must also note that the Creature does break this frame and is no longer contained within the narrative but rather "lost in darkness and distance," demonstrating also that the harmful qualities that the Creature represents could still be running amok in the world (Shelley 186).

Victor (Peter Cushing) petitions the priest to hear his tale. From Hammer's *The Curse of Frankenstein*. Source: http://cinematiccatharsis.blogspot.com/2011/07/curse-of-frankenstein.html

The existence of *Frankenstein* adaptations supports the notion that Shelley's monster never fully left the world but rather was incorporated repeatedly into culture. Esther Schor notes that "the epistolary frame of the novel is missing from most Frankenstein films, though others sorts of framing devices are sometimes used," as is the case in Hammer's 1957 *The Curse of Frankenstein* (64). In this particular film, a priest takes the place of Captain Walton and serves as the listener for Victor Frankenstein's tale. Indeed, Walton himself usually does not find his way into these adaptations and is either replaced or completely eliminated. (A notable exception is Kenneth Branagh's 1994 *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.*) A large variety of adaptations even eliminate the Creature's frame by depriving him of his ability to speak. These films include but are not limited to James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein* and Terrence Fisher's 1957 *The Curse of Frankenstein*. Even in adaptations where the Creature is allowed speech, the film or play typically operates within one frame and favors a third person, objective point of view. Schor proposes that this method of production "[throws] off" the "ironies that ride the impacted narratives" (64). At the same time, the adapter's decision to forego the use of the frame narrative opens the adaptations to the exploration of themes and mediums that bring Shelley's work into a new light for consideration.

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Suggestions for Further Reading

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Sum up characters.

receives a moral lesson →
- Walton - grand adventure / obsession meets VF
- VF - difficulties / obsession
- M - " : isolation, loneliness, self-education, rejection challenges who is the monster.
- VF -
- RW - intrusion of M into frame who leaves again to create havoc? → returns "home"

C/R

- Victor's reform? contradicted by Walton and V spurring on crew. Acknowledges M's existence takes responsibility.