Frame narratives- Frankenstein- notes

(Source: **Framing the Frame: Embedded Narratives Enabling Texts and *Frankenstein***

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**Abstract:**

**Frame narrative** (usually assuming and elaborating a liminal, distinguishing, or transitional “picture-frame” metaphor) are incomplete, describing only the initial experience of “coming at” and “moving off from” the text as a pre-existing artifact.

**An alternative** analysis would emphasize narrative acts and enabling texts (guided by the metaphor of an internal, form-giving “frame-work”), and thus describe the process by which the textual artifact comes into being, shaping itself over time into the text we eventually read.

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* we might distinguish **three frame sequences**:

**R*eading* sequence**-

***Action* sequence**-

**N*arrative* sequence**:

The narrative sequence is the primary, enabling frame shaping the novel, and is dependent upon three levels of narrative refiguring:

*rhetorical*,

*elemental*, and

*intentional*

**Each narrative act** in Shelley’s novel is **enabled and shaped by a previous narrative act**, and each narrative text produced by these acts is the peculiar result of the narrative sequence that engenders it. The tension between narrative act and narrative text in *Frankenstein*forms a fundamental dialectic process, producing an ambiguously authoritative artifact.

**Examining frame narrative**

*Frankenstein* (1818; 1831), concentric narrative with an unusually focused and influential core: Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. I will try to show that Milton’s epic acts as the central, enabling, and shaping text for the narrative process of *Frankenstein*. This is to say more than that *Paradise Lost* is a constant source of Shelley’s allusion and imagery, or that Shelley re-enacts fundamental **Miltonic themes of creation, duty, prohibition, and transgression**; these points seem plain, and we need only consult Shelley’s epigraph for evidence of thematic connection.[[7]](https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ron/1900-v1-n1-ron738/008697ar/#no7) Rather, I want to suggest that while ***Paradise Lost* is certainly a powerful *external* influence on Shelley’s formulation and our reading of *Frankenstein*, it is also situated as a catalytic influence on the *internal* world of the tale, as that tale determines and shapes itself through a series of enabling and activating narratives. In short, *Paradise Lost* is the matrix (or “frame-work”) upon which Shelley builds (or “frames”) the characters, motivations, actions, and readings of *Frankenstein* (its “frames of reference”) and which enables the concentric structure (or “framing”) of the narratives**. In order to describe this structure I will first discuss the general architecture of **frame sequences** in *Frankenstein*, and then examine the narrative frame sequence in particular.

**II**

*Frankenstein*’s narrative architecture **comprises three separate frame sequences**, each enabled and directed by a **different narrator**:

**The *reading sequence* provided by Robert Walton,**

The *reading sequence* is the preliminary process by which readers move through a series of “picture-frame” narratives, as Walton’s letters frame (or enclose) Frankenstein’s history, which in turn frames (or encloses) the Creature’s tale.[[8]](https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ron/1900-v1-n1-ron738/008697ar/#no8) Our experience of the reading sequence moves us from exterior to interior, but also from the most recent narrative (Walton’s letters) to the earliest (the Creature’s tale), all of which are recorded by and related through Walton. Our position during the reading sequence approximates that of Walton’s sister, Margaret Saville, in reading her brother’s letters; we experience the narratives as a set of texts arranged not according to the chronology of actions they represent, nor the order in which the narratives were originally related, but instead as they were received and came to have situational meaning to the perceiver (in this case, Walton). The reading sequence thus suggests the “picture-frame” metaphor by providing transitional spaces, introducing Shelley’s readers to increasingly alien narrators and situations as we move from Walton to Frankenstein to the Creature: from the margins of reality to the center of **alterity (sense of otherness).**

**The *action sequence* constructed by Victor Frankenstein,**

The ***action sequence*** is the series of narrated events reconstructed as they occurred chronologically. In Shelley’s novel this sequence is directed by Frankenstein, who relates the earliest events in the story (his parents’ courtship and marriage, his own upbringing and education, and so forth). By interpolating the Creature’s narrative within his own, Frankenstein supplies information to the action sequence that would otherwise be unavailable or inaccessible (the Creature’s education, his murder of William and implication of Justine Moritz, and so on). *Frankenstein*’s action sequence requires a separate level of engagement from the reader, as we must reconstruct the events by transforming the reading sequence into the action sequence in a second cognitive operation; we must, for example, re-order the events of Walton’s narrative to come after the events of Frankenstein’s, as we must relocate the events related by the Creature within earlier portions of Frankenstein’s narrative.

**The *narrative sequence* initiated by Frankenstein’s Creature.**

The *narrative sequence* in *Frankenstein* is yet a deeper structural arrangement: it is the chronological order in which the narrative acts take place. As I shall argue, the narrative sequence actually enables and shapes the reading and action sequences in Shelley’s work. Let us say provisionally that the narrative sequence is initiated and directed by the Creature (a claim I will modify later), whose narrative is chronologically the first significant, detailed and revealing narrative by a character in the story. All before has been silence (on Frankenstein’s part) or half-understood allusion to events that the Creature will later make clear (such as Justine Moritz’s account of the night of William’s murder). Indeed, Frankenstein’s silence—his failure to narrate his life at Ingolstadt in letters to his family, and his refusal to articulate his belief that the Creature is William’s murderer—is one source of his culpability.[[9]](https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ron/1900-v1-n1-ron738/008697ar/#no9) The Creature’s narrative enables its train of audiences (Frankenstein, Walton, and Margaret Saville-Shelley’s reader) to understand those obscured events rightly. From this primary speaking position, the Creature’s narrative sets in motion events, revelations, and conceived dialectics of protagonism/antagonism, authority/submission, and creator/creature—all of which eventually lead to the physical situation and conceptual form that enable Frankenstein’s narrative to Walton. Frankenstein’s narrative, of course, then enables and prompts the conceptual form of Walton’s narrative to his sister (and thus to Shelley’s reader). In this way, the Creature’s narrative—his own creature, so to speak—is the creator of the tale we read.[[10]](https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ron/1900-v1-n1-ron738/008697ar/#no10)

**O’Dea posits:**

*Frankenstein* offers a kind of reverse ***mise en abyme***( French technique of placing a copy of an image or in the novel- a frame of the narrative within other narratives within itself, often in a way that suggests infinity), in which the outset narratives reflect and refigure the enabling and shaping inset narratives.[[12]](https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ron/1900-v1-n1-ron738/008697ar/#no12)

***Rhetorical* refiguring** of an inset narrative takes place on the level of language as the narrator of a superior level adopts words and phrases from a previous (embedded) narrative.

***Elemental refiguring***, the embedded narrative influences the superior narrator’s decisions about which story elements to include in his own narrative; that is, what events make the superior narrator’s story significant as a narrative.

***Intentional* refiguring occurs as a superior narrator derives his purpose**—the intended effect of his narrative act—from influential aspects of the embedded narrative. In the presence of such narrative refiguring, embedded narratives assume a crucial position: they become *enabling texts*.[[13]](https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ron/1900-v1-n1-ron738/008697ar/#no13)

**III**

Above, I made the provisional claim that Frankenstein’s Creature originates and directs the narrative sequence of Shelley’s tale. I should like now to revise that claim, for in truth the Creature’s narrative is itself enabled and patterned by the deeper frame-work of *Paradise Lost*. Like the Creature himself, his tale is a refiguration of parts belonging to others. Shelley herself remarks on such deeply-situated “origins” in her “Author’s Introduction” to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*: “Every thing must have a beginning,” she writes,

[. . .] and that beginning must be linked to something that went before [. . .]. Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself [. . .]. Invention consists in the capacity of seizing on the capabilities of a subject, and in the power of moulding and fashioning ideas suggested to it.

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**Narrative refiguring—rhetorical, elemental, and intentional**—is the process by which the core of significant structure in *Frankenstein* strains outward and reshapes itself toward the perceiver through a sequence of framing narratives, moving from interior alterity (the Creature’s narrative) to exterior familiarity (Walton’s letters).

The narrative sequence of *Frankenstein* begins with the Creature’s adoption of *Paradise Lost* as his essential frame of reference, and so we turn to the portmanteau of books that the Creature discovers in chapter 15 of the novel. Though these books do not make up his earliest experience, they do provide a frame of reference that structures and shapes that experience. The Creature reads each of these works as “true history” (129), and during and after his reading he attempts to fit his own experience into the framing contexts these works seem to provide. Goethe’s *The Sufferings of Young Werther* offers a frame of reference for the Creature’s uncontextualized feelings and sensibilities. As he says, he was “unformed in mind,” but in Goethe “the lofty sentiments and feelings, which had for their object something out of self, accorded well with my experience [. . .] and with the wants which were forever alive in my own bosom. [. . .] As I read [. . .] I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition” (128). This Ur-frame of feeling enables the Creature’s self-questioning, a necessary location of self in a context of defined and expressed emotional references: “What did this mean?” he asks; “Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?” (128). **Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*** “had a far different effect” on the Creature: “Plutarch taught me high thoughts; he elevated me above the wretched sphere of my own reflections, to admire and love the heroes of past ages” (128-29). Here the Creature adopts a frame of reference beyond self, a social frame in which self is defined in relationship to others.

**The last and most affecting text in the portmanteau is *Paradise Lost*,** which “moved every feeling of wonder and awe that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting” (129). While it is enabled by Goethe (the Ur-frame of self) and Plutarch (the Ur-frame of other), this text becomes the Creature’s defining frame of reference, as it comprises both self and other and extends those Ur-frames outward (to a cosmic level) and inward (to a psychic level). While reading *Paradise Lost*, the Creature says, “I often referred the several situations as their similarity struck me, to my own. Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence [. . .]. Many times I considered Satan the fitter emblem of my condition” (129). His reading of Milton gives the Creature a suitably clear and complex frame of reference: clear because in the Adam-Satan dichotomy the Creature sees a double structure of potential, a shaping figure of the world and the previously “unformed” self; complex because the potential of that dichotomy is necessarily ambivalent, and the Creature’s narrative proves him capable of sliding easily between the poles of Adam (benevolence) and Satan (malevolence).

**The rhetoric of the Creature’s narrative is the most overt indication that *Paradise Lost* acts as a referential frame. Most instances in which the Creature alludes to *Paradise Lost*** are well known: he remarks that the De Laceys’ cottage seemed “as exquisite and divine a retreat as Pandaemonium appeared to the daemons of hell after their sufferings in the lake of fire” (106); describing his loneliness, he says that “no Eve soothed my sorrows, nor shared my thoughts [. . .] I remembered Adam’s supplication to his Creator. But where was mine? He had abandoned me [. . .]” (131); and later he says that “Evil thenceforth became my good” (220). Other rhetorical allusions, of course, abound.[[14]](https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ron/1900-v1-n1-ron738/008697ar/#no14) Milton’s poem thus supplies the Creature with a discourse, a source of descriptive metaphor that shapes his view of the world and allows him to express that view according to the supplied discourse. Even more significant is what the Miltonic rhetoric suggests about the role of *Paradise Lost* in the narrative sequence of *Frankenstein*. The Creature’s adoption of Milton as his experiential frame leads naturally to its adoption as a narrative frame-work, an enabling text, without which the Creature’s narrative would not be what it is, rhetorically, elementally, or intentionally.

**The Creature’s elemental refiguration of *Paradise Lost* is essential to any understanding of Shelley’s work, for here we see in its deepest form the degree to which Milton’s epic has become both a perceptual and cognitive frame of reference for the Creature, and that frame will reproduce itself in the narratives enabled by the Creature’s text**. The matrix for this elemental frame is the ambivalent Adam-Satan dichotomy that the Creature uses as a *locus* for self. He seems to slide between identifications with Adam and Satan, but gradually assumes the identity of Adam-turned-Satan: “I ought to be thy Adam,” he tells Frankenstein, “but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed [. . .]. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend” (100). These identifications—the Creature’s consistent appropriation of *Paradise Lost* as a metaphor for self, other, and world—determine which elements of his experience he will narrate; his perception of experience is shaped by the degree to which that experience can be given context by *Paradise Lost*. This is not to say (necessarily) that the Creature consciously acts out scenes from Milton’s epic, but rather (at least) that he views his past experience through the frame that *Paradise Lost* provides. Though his earlier experiences occur long before his exposure to Milton, his narrative act takes place after adopting *Paradise Lost* as his context, and thus even those early experiences are defined, selected, and narrated by reference to Milton’s enabling text.

The Creature’s earliest experiences are selected and cast in his narrative for their resemblance to the formative, self-defining experiences of Milton’s Adam and Eve, as recounted in books 4 and 8 of *Paradise Lost*. Like Adam, who admits to Raphael that “‘For Man to tell how human Life began / Is hard; for who himself beginning knew?’” (*PL* 8.250-51), the Creature wakes into being alone and has trouble recalling the event clearly: “It is with considerable difficulty,” he tells Frankenstein, “that I remember the original era of my being: all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct” (102). Nevertheless, he can offer some account of his early days, comparable to Adam’s in shape and structure but pointedly contrastive in emotional content. To Adam, for example, the sun is a godlike, beneficent presence, but to the Creature it is “oppressive” and “wearying” (102); Adam eats “the fairest Fruit, that Hung to the Eye / Tempting” (*PL* 8.307-08), while the Creature is “tormented by hunger and thirst” (103). In light of his claims of “considerable difficulty” in recalling “the original era of [his] being,” the Creature’s selection and arrangement of these experiences indicate that he remembers them only because they are analogous to the events described by Adam; indeed, we might wonder if he has not confused his own early experience with that of Milton’s hero. In a similar moment of selection, the Creature makes a special point of representing his first glimpse of himself in a “transparent pool,” an event he remembers as he does because it is later reinforced by his reading of Eve’s encounter with her own reflection in “‘the clear / Smooth Lake’“ (*PL* 4.458-59). Eve’s is a scene of naive self adoration in which she and her reflection exchange “‘answering looks / Of sympathy and love’” (*PL* 4.464-65), while the Creature’s own experience is physically similar but emotionally inverted; he is “terrified” by his own image (114).

The Creature’s later experiences—those following his rejection by the De Laceys—are selected and cast in his narrative for their resemblance to Satan’s descriptions of suffering and vengeance following his expulsion from Heaven. Recounting the evening of William’s murder, the Creature says that he exclaimed, “‘I, too, can create desolation; my enemy [Frankenstein] is not invulnerable; this death will carry despair to him [. . .]’” (143). As **described by Beelzebub, Satan’s** plan for vengeance against God is built upon a similar equation of death and despair: “‘To waste his whole Creation [. . .]. This would surpass / Common revenge, and interrupt his joy / In our Confusion’” (*PL* 2.365-72). Like Satan, the Creature claims to prefer a less violent course of action, but feels he is left no choice: “I am malicious because I am miserable,” he insists; “[. . .] if I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear; and chiefly towards you my arch-enemy, because my creator, do I swear inextinguishable hatred” (145). Satan’s claims to innocence undoubtedly provide models for the Creature’s rationalizations.

**The Creature’s elemental selections, then, demonstrate a “slide” between the poles of the Adam-Satan dichotomy**. He constructs his narrative text upon the frame of reference provided by Milton’s epic, and so represents himself as Adam-turned-Satan—or more precisely, as Adam *manqué*-turned-Satan (“I *ought* to be your Adam [. . .]” [100; emphasis added]). But these elemental selections are not necessarily unconscious, for the Creature also designs his narrative to serve a clear purpose, the exact nature of which is not revealed until the narrative’s conclusion: to persuade Frankenstein to fashion a female companion. This narrative intention, of course, is suggested by Adam’s similar complaint to God (*PL* 8.357-451), but unlike Adam’s speech, the Creature’s narrative is also an attempt at persuasion, an argument of *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* designed to “seduce” (or tempt) Frankenstein into cooperation with the Creature’s desires. The narrative intention is thus also enabled by Satan’s temptation of Eve (*PL* 9.532-732). Once again, the Adam-Satan dichotomy frames the text of the Creature’s narrative: his Satanic attempt at persuasion argues that he is Adam *manqué* in need of a companion, and that if he were given an Eve, he would revert to a true Adamic state.[[15]](https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ron/1900-v1-n1-ron738/008697ar/#no15)