

***Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley**

Mary Shelley (1797–1851)

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley is best known as the author of *Frankenstein*; or, *The Modern Prometheus* (1818). She was born August 30, 1797, in London, England. The daughter of two well-known authors, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary experienced early years full of instability. Her mother died ten days after her birth, and she was raised by her father and stepmother. In 1812 she met the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, a friend of her father, and in 1814 they ran off together, though Percy was already married. During Mary and Percy's subsequent travels in Europe, Mary began work on *Frankenstein*. Percy's wife Harriet committed suicide in 1816, and shortly afterward Percy and Mary were married. Four years after *Frankenstein* was published, Percy drowned. Mary died of a brain tumor on February 1, 1851, in London.

Historical Context

The novel was first published in 1818. It was written originally by Mary Shelley as a short story when the poet Lord Byron suggested that each member of a group of friends write a ghostly tale to keep themselves entertained. Mary's story was the undoubted winner.

Plot summary

Frankenstein tells the story of gifted scientist Victor Frankenstein who succeeds in giving life to a being of his own creation. However, this is not the perfect specimen he imagines that it will be, but rather a hideous creature who is rejected by Victor and mankind in general. The Monster seeks its revenge through murder and terror.

Summary Details

1. Robert Walton, an explorer, tells how he has met Victor Frankenstein in the Arctic after earlier having seen a 'gigantic figure' crossing the ice.
2. Victor tells of his childhood and his caring family, particularly of his love for his foster sister Elizabeth. His mother dies of fever just before he leaves to study at university.
3. While at university, Victor's interest in science becomes an obsession. Victor uses dead bodies to experiment on and creates a monster made of body parts. He is immediately disgusted by the thing he has created and abandons it.
4. Victor's brother William is murdered and Justine Moritz, a family servant, is executed for it. However, Victor believes the Monster is to blame after witnessing it at the scene of the murder.

5. The Monster and Victor meet on the Glacier of Montanvert in the Alps. The Monster tells the story of how it has survived and of the time it has spent becoming educated.
6. The Monster asks Victor to admit responsibility for his actions and show some sympathy. He also pleads with Victor to build a female companion. Victor agrees.
7. Victor finds a remote spot in the Orkneys where he begins to construct the female creature but suddenly, realising the consequences of what he is doing, he tears it to pieces. The Monster, who has followed Victor, is enraged and in revenge kills Victor's best friend, Henry Clerval.
8. Victor and Elizabeth marry, but Victor finds his new wife dead at the hands of the Monster. He vows to hunt the creature down.
9. In Walton's last letters, back in the Arctic, Frankenstein dies and the Monster, still miserable, heads off, probably to its own death.

Written at a time of great social change, *Frankenstein* is about the power of scientific ambition and the dangers of going a step too far.

Analysis

Mary Shelley's novel, published between 1816 and 1818, revolutionized the literary landscape. It is widely considered the first true science fiction novel, blending elements of Gothic horror with speculative science to explore complex themes of creation, responsibility, and the human condition. "Frankenstein" not only introduced a new genre but also posed critical questions about the ethical limits of scientific exploration, the nature of humanity, and the consequences of playing God. This seminal work has influenced countless writers and continues to be a cornerstone of literary study, demonstrating Shelley's profound impact on literature and culture.

Frankenstein is classically romantic in its emphasis on feelings over intellect and the dangers of relying exclusively on intellect; the frightening, awe-inspiring nature of the sublime; the loneliness of the sensitive hero; and the sadness inherent in the human ability to corrupt what should be naturally good. In the novel, arrogant scientist Victor Frankenstein creates a man using dead bodies, and animates him. The childlike monster wants only to be loved, but horrifies everyone who sees him.

Major Themes

A major theme in "Frankenstein" is the **danger of seeking too much knowledge and the risks of unchecked ambition**. Victor Frankenstein's obsession with creating life leads to his downfall. His pursuit of scientific discovery, without thinking about the consequences, brings about suffering and death. This theme warns us about the potential harm of pushing the boundaries of science and technology too far.

Isolation and loneliness are central to both Victor and the Monster's experiences. Victor isolates himself from family and friends in his quest to create life, leading to his emotional and physical downfall. The Monster, rejected by Victor and society, suffers profound loneliness. This theme highlights the importance of companionship and the devastating effects of being alone and unloved.

Nature in the novel often reflects the emotions of the Frankenstein characters and serves as a source of solace and inspiration. The sublime, awe-inspiring landscapes symbolize the power and beauty of the natural world, contrasting with Victor's unnatural creations.

Quote from Frankenstein

"...now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time traversing my bedchamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep."

Explanation

Victor's initial dreams of scientific glory are instantly replaced by horror and regret when he sees the reality of his creation, highlighting themes of unchecked ambition, failed responsibility, and the tragic consequences of overreaching.

Victor Frankenstein, after years of obsessive labor and self-sacrifice in pursuit of his scientific ambitions, is immediately overcome with horror and disgust upon bringing his creation to life. The stark contrast between his long-held, idealistic dreams of creating a new race and the grim reality of the creature's appearance is powerfully conveyed through his visceral reaction. The language—particularly words like "breathless horror and disgust"—emphasizes the depth of Victor's revulsion and the monstrous nature of what he has wrought. Rather than assuming responsibility for his creation, Victor abandons the creature, setting in motion a tragic chain of events. This moment marks a crucial turning point: Victor's ambition collapses into regret, and his inability to accept the consequences of his actions leads to

suffering for both himself and others. The passage encapsulates central themes such as the dangers of unchecked ambition, the perils of playing God, the responsibilities inherent in creation, and the profound gulf between fantasy and reality. Victor's self-pity and remorse further highlight his failure to empathize with the being he has brought into the world, underscoring the novel's exploration of guilt and the limits of human knowledge.

Sources:

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