

FRANKENSTEIN



His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful—Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriences only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.

—Victor Frankenstein, Vol. 1 Ch. 5

We recently finished Volume I of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Based on descriptions from the text, each of you created images of the monster. Here are a few:



Dominique Herman

Masen Wagner



Jessica Lowman

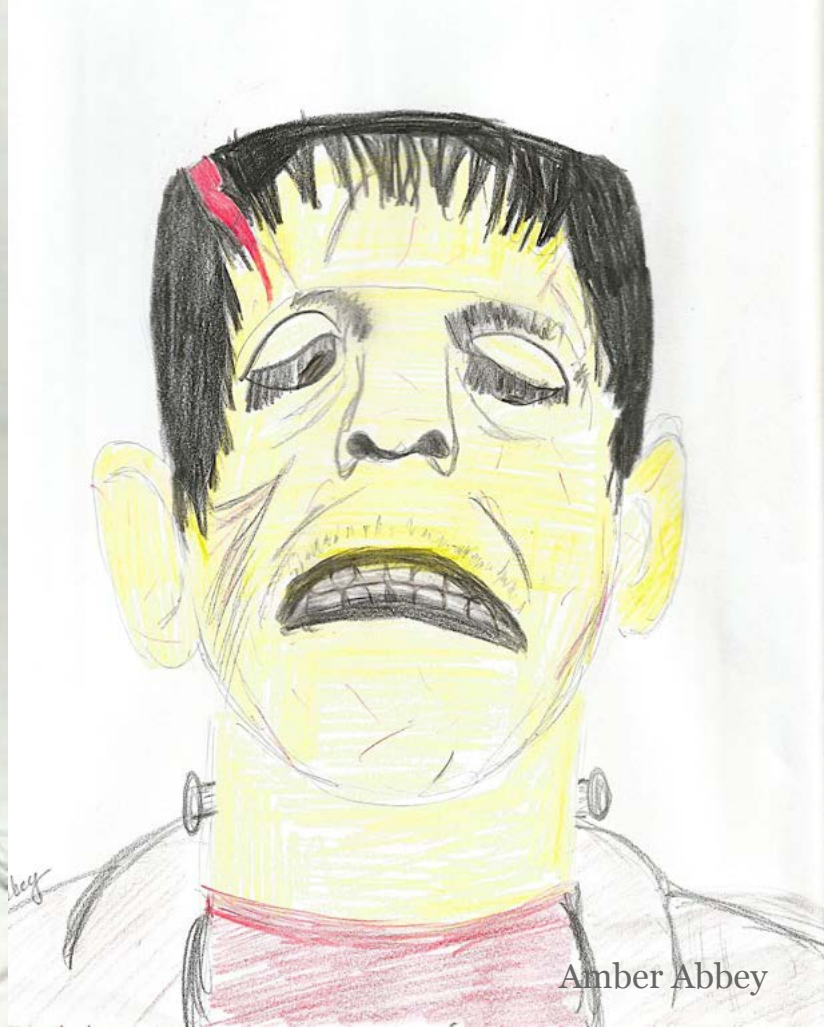
Michele Brunker



Wesley Glowitz



Megan Bush



Amber Abbey



Jamie Burger



Zachary Kisner

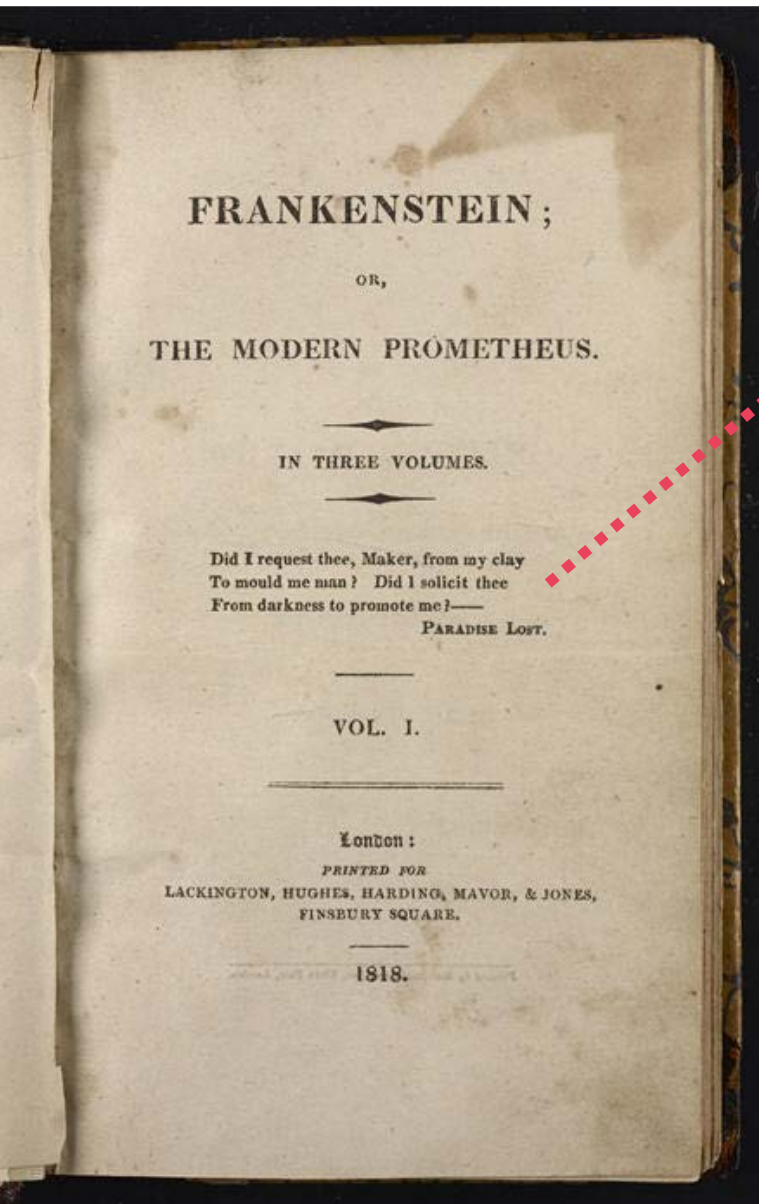
It seems like we can't picture the creature's *true* appearance

Even Victor Frankenstein, who spends two years looking at it, doesn't actually "see" the creature until it becomes animated, and then he is astonished by its appearance. While he's at work on his creation, it is just too big for Victor to perceive as an organic whole. Is this Shelley's take on the experience of writing a novel? Once a book interacts with readers it becomes a text, one that has agency independent of its maker.

In some ways, this anxiety manifests itself through one of Shelley's narrative techniques: *delay*. Just as Victor has to wait two years before he can really see his creation as it truly appears, Shelley makes readers wait until the fifth chapter for a description of the creature, and even then we are given only an ambiguous description. We anticipate the iconic creation scene at the beginning of the novel, but what we get are letters from Walton to his sister, Margaret Seville. Wait, what are his sister's initials?...

The novel is Shelley's rendering of Walton's account of Frankenstein's description of the events that transpire throughout the novel. At every turn, it seems, Shelley is reminding us that there is an author behind the words we are reading. At the same time, however, she is making it apparent that the "novel" is always out of reach, to its author as well as to readers. We can see words on the page, but perception of the novel's "true" meaning is endlessly deferred—what it "means" is something the author can't control and the reader can't determine. When we try to use language to describe reality, we are mocked by the very thing we are trying to manipulate, just as Victor is mocked by his creation. Shelley is rendered as a voiceless text in the form of initials ("M.S." in Walton's letters, who never appears in the novel); similarly, we too are produced by—and created as—language. In other words, we don't create language—language creates us. In its own image.

It's fitting, then, that the novel has no real protagonist. Is it the creator or the created? Who is the main actor? And isn't it telling that most people attribute the name "Frankenstein" to the monster instead of to Victor, thus reversing the identities of creator and created?



There is a passage from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* on the title page of the 1818 (first) edition, but there's no mention of the speaker:

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mould me man? Did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?—
PARADISE LOST.

Adam poses this question, but many readers assume that this is something Satan asks God after his fall from heaven. And who is the "Maker"? God is one possibility, but Shelley's subtitle complicates things. Prometheus, who possesses the gift of foresight, is the Titan who brings fire to humans. But in the hands of another author-maker (Ovid), Prometheus creates clay from which humans are formed, serving as his own kind of "Maker." In other words, Shelley makes it difficult to determine who is speaking and who is being addressed, and

it's unclear to which Prometheus tale she is referring. And just when we thought this couldn't get any more complicated, another question presents itself: who is the maker of this novel? Shelley's name is nowhere to be found. Like Prometheus, like Milton's characters, and like Victor and his creature, we are all textual objects—paradoxical and proleptic products, endlessly searching for meaning and maker.

What do *your* Frankenstein creations say about their makers?