



THE
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MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY,

FRANKENSTEIN

(1818, REVISED 1831)

Frankenstein, first published in 1818, was extensively revised for the third edition of 1831 and published with an expanded introduction. While a number of recent critics and editors have preferred the 1818 edition, the 1831 edition remains the more conventional choice and will be referred to here. A useful summary and discussion of the substantive changes can be found in Marilyn Butler's appendix to her edition of the 1818 text.

The complex structure of *Frankenstein* involves a series of framed or embedded narratives. In the outermost layer, Robert Walton describes his attempt to reach the North Pole and his encounter with Victor Frankenstein, in a series of letters to Walton's sister, Margaret Saville. Within this relatively realistic layer, there is the more marvellous account of Frankenstein, who tells Walton the story of how he created and abandoned the monster, the revenge it took upon him by destroying those he loved most, and his eventual pursuit of the creature. Further narratives can be found within Victor's account, in, for example, the letters from Elizabeth, who was taken in by the Frankenstein family as a child and whom he supposedly intends to marry, and from his father. In the central layer of narrative, the creature then challenges Frankenstein's account of events as he describes his development after his flight, and his experiences of rejection. Within this story we also learn about the history of the De Lacey family and of Felix De Lacey's betrothed Safie.

In addition to all these narratives, there are numerous references to extra-textual narratives, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1798), another tale of an alienated individual and the disturbance of natural order, and the three books the creature discovers in the woods. The most important of these, Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), provides both an epigraph for the novel and a framework through which

both the creature and Victor understand their changing situations. As many critics observe, the novel as an aggregate of narrative pieces and literary influences is closely connected to the creature, constructed from fragments of corpses. Both are hybrid forms, monstrous (q.v.) bodies, a connection made by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley herself when she concludes her 1831 introduction by bidding her 'hideous progeny go forth and prosper'.

Frankenstein, as the subtitle to the story indicates, is a searcher after forbidden knowledge, one of those overreachers who refuse to accept limitations and are subsequently punished. But he is specifically a 'modern' Prometheus, partly because this is a notably secular world with no gods against whom to rebel, and partly because his search is conceived of in scientific terms. *Frankenstein* introduces the prototypical Gothic mad scientist and registers some anxieties about scientific progress unaccompanied by social conscience. The potential problems of Frankenstein's search for the principle of life are soon suggested: his studies alienate him from his family, and from the start lead him to charnel houses, to death and corruption. As his language implies, even Frankenstein himself feels some unease concerning his 'secret toil' in his 'workshop of filthy creation'. In creating life and imagining how a 'new species would bless me as its creator and source', he is seeking to usurp the role of God. He is also, however, seeking to usurp the role of women, and such an unnatural birth, the text suggests, can only have unnatural consequences.

At the actual moment of the creature's animation, Frankenstein is horrified. Immediately rejecting the creature as monstrous on the basis of his physical appearance, Frankenstein runs away and attempts to forget in sleep. This sleep is disturbed by a nightmare in which Elizabeth, as he tries to kiss her, transforms into the rotting corpse of his mother. Then, as he awakens, the image is replaced by that of the creature, who is seen, on the first of three such occasions, by the 'dim and yellow light of the moon' at the window.

In juxtaposing the dream with the vision of the creature, the text prophetically suggests that bringing the monster to life is equivalent to killing Elizabeth. Furthermore, as Elizabeth changes into the corpse of the mother, the dream emphasizes Frankenstein's circumvention of the normal channels of procreation: giving life to the creature has effectively eliminated the mother. The dream also implies much about the psychological state of the dreamer himself, suggesting at the very least some anxieties concerning sexuality – this is something we might remember later when, on their wedding night, Frankenstein tells his new bride 'Oh! Peace, peace, my love . . . this night, and all will be safe: but this night is dreadful, very dreadful.' As Frankenstein awakens from his dream with a start, the language used to

describe his physical manifestations of fear, particularly the reference to the way his limbs 'convulsed', echoes the language used to describe the animation of the creature. This may be the first indication that the creature can be seen as Frankenstein's double, something that Victor further implies when he subsequently refers to the creature as 'my own spirit let loose from the grave . . . forced to destroy all that was dear to me'. The doubling does not, however, give form only to the return of the repressed energies of an individual psyche: the monstrous other here is both psychological and social.

The creature's own narrative suggests that Frankenstein's main sin is not his act of creation but his failure to take responsibility for what he produces, and it is through the creature's account that the text most explicitly engages with the problematic question of the monstrous. Initially he appears in terms of the born innocent who will be formed by environment and circumstance. As his education proceeds and he moves from nature to culture, the creature learns about and experiences the injustices of society. He masters language, but rather than allowing him access to human society it only serves to make him aware of his unique origin and to alienate him further.

Although the creature may be physically repellent, he is initially far more natural and humane than the creator who rejects him, the villagers who stone him, and the ungrateful father who shoots him. Set oppositions between the human and the monstrous are further disturbed by demonstrations of the corruption of social institutions, including the law and the church. In the story of the De Laceys and the trial of Justine, human injustice is repeatedly emphasized. As Elizabeth declares after Justine's execution, 'men appear to me as monsters thirsting for each other's blood'. Sometimes read as a metaphor for the violent masses in times of political upheaval, the creature offers his own critique of human institutions, and initially turns away in 'disgust and loathing' from evidence of 'vice and bloodshed'. It is only when he is exposed to, and begins to suffer from, the viciousness of human society that he is gradually contaminated by a similar violence and aggression and starts to replicate the very human characteristics that initially repulse him.

The question of the monstrous is also problematized by the way in which it is repeatedly suggested to be little more than a discursive effect. Frankenstein, an unreliable narrator at best, repeatedly misreads such things as the creature's gesture towards him at the moment of animation, and the creature's words regarding his wedding night; later, he even assumes the food and clothing left for him as he pursues the creature must come from some guardian angel. They are, of course, left by the creature himself, but Frankenstein reveals a mind determined to impose coherence in accordance with his own understanding of himself as a victim and his creature as a mon-

strous force to be eliminated. His language, as much as any act of the creature, functions to produce monstrosity.

This is particularly notable in the scene when he destroys the female he is creating to be the mate of the creature. Contrasting markedly with his creator's evident reluctance to settle his 'union' with Elizabeth, the creature's desire for companionship is one of his most human qualities. Nevertheless, while Frankenstein is eventually persuaded by his eloquence to make the creature a companion, he repeatedly challenges this evidence of humanity with his declared revulsion for the 'filthy mass that moved and talked'. Furthermore, once Frankenstein starts his new project, he completely rewrites the creature's explanations, and convinces himself that the creation of a mate may result in 'a race of devils to be propagated upon the earth'. As the creature watches, once more from a window, and once more by the dim light of the moon, Frankenstein tears the female apart. 'I will be with thee on thy wedding night', the creature threatens, a remark that Frankenstein perhaps egoistically, perhaps purposely, perhaps inexplicably, interprets as a threat to himself. From then on, recognizing he is doomed to be excluded from the domestic world, the creature devotes himself to its annihilation.

The destruction of the female mate needs to be seen in the context of the idealizing narrative of the family revolving around Elizabeth and, in the case of Walton, Margaret Saville. The creature idealizes the domestic world, but is excluded from it. Both Frankenstein and Walton repeatedly sing the praises of the domestic world, but take great pains to escape it. Both display the egocentricity and ambition that prompt many critics to read *Frankenstein* as a critique of the underlying masculine assumptions and values of the romantic imagination. It is, nevertheless, not entirely clear that the domestic female world is presented as an ideal alternative to the individualistic male world. The responsibilities of the insular domestic sphere may place too much of a curb upon individual desires, while strictly enforced artificial role distinctions result in the creation of passive, dependent women who ultimately become monsters to be rejected. As Maggie Kilgour observes, perhaps by turning in upon itself, 'the family doesn't wall monsters out, but ends up producing its own' (1995: 202).

The creature's final revenge is the death of Elizabeth. On the wedding night, Victor leaves Elizabeth alone in the bedroom while he wanders the corridors, supposedly anticipating combat with the creature. The result is predictable: Frankenstein returns to find the body of Elizabeth 'flung by the murderer on its bridal bier'. Enacting the scene of his nightmare, he embraces her only to find that she is dead; he faints, and when he awakens, once more, by the light of the moon, the creature looks on from the window.

Shelley, Frankenstein (1818, revised 1831)

Frankenstein concludes his story with an account of his pursuit of the creature into the polar regions, and the narrative then returns to Walton. In the face of impending mutiny, he has reluctantly agreed to turn the ship back home. Frankenstein dies, and Walton discovers the creature, full of grief and horror, bending over the corpse. With the intention of immolating himself on a funeral pyre, the creature springs from the cabin window. Little, however, has been resolved. The boundaries between the human and the monstrous remain problematically blurred, and Shelley leaves the reader, like the creature, 'lost in darkness and distance'.

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