

AN INTRODUCTION TO

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An Introduction to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

By

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‘I busied myself *to think of a story*...One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror—one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart.’

(From Mary Shelley’s Introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*).

The life of Mary Shelley (1797-1851)

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was born in London on 30 August 1797, to the radical feminist Mary Wollstonecraft and the philosopher William Godwin. Her mother died as a result of complications following the birth, and after Godwin’s second marriage Mary was brought up with two stepsiblings, a half-sister (Fanny Imlay), and a half-brother (named William, after their father).

Their home in Holborn was located near the candlelit abattoirs under Smithfield: indeed, the children could hear the screams of animals being slaughtered. On a more positive note Mary benefited from a broad education, enhanced by visits to the household from literary luminaries including William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. At the age of ten she had an amusing

poem published: *Mounseer Nongtongpaw; or, The Discoveries of John Bull in a Trip to Paris*.

Unfortunately her relationship with her stepmother was far from cordial, and the onset of eczema when Mary was thirteen may have been partly psychosomatic. As she had poor health generally, she was sometimes sent away for long periods of recuperation. During one of the journeys she hid her money in her stays for safe-keeping; nevertheless it was stolen from her!

The poet Percy Shelley first met Mary in 1812. Later they arranged clandestine meetings beside her mother's grave. Shelley and his friend Byron advocated that people should follow ideals rather than imposed conventions and rules. Lady Caroline Lamb famously declared that Byron was 'Mad, bad and dangerous to know', and similar accusations were pointed at Shelley (who was nicknamed 'Mad Shelley' at Eton). In 1814 he deserted his pregnant wife, Harriet, to elope with Mary, who was also expecting a baby. Their travels took them to France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland, and were described in the co-authored text *History of a Six Weeks Tour* (1817). They were accompanied by Mary's stepsister, Jane (later Claire) Clairmont, in a scandalous, unconventional triangular relationship which lasted for eight years.

Baby Clara was born in February 1815, but lived for only twelve days. Mary's journal records concerns that her death might have been prevented. In January of the following year she gave birth to a

son, William. The travellers were in Geneva when Byron proposed that they should write ghost stories. Ultimately, Mary's contribution developed into her novel *Frankenstein*. It is remarkable to think that she began this extraordinary work when she was just eighteen years old.

The suicides of Fanny Imlay and Shelley's wife also occurred in that memorable year, 1816. Shelley married Mary, and their third child, another Clara, arrived in 1817. Mary completed her book: *Frankenstein* was published – anonymously - on 1 January 1818. Little Clara passed away in the same year, then William died of malaria in 1819. Percy had a jotting book, in which he conveyed their heartbreak:

*My dearest M. wherefore hast thou gone
And left me in this dreary world alone,
Thy form is here indeed – a lovely one –
But thou art fled, gone down the dreary road,
That leads to Sorrow's most obscure abode...
For thine own sake I cannot follow thee
Do thou return for mine.*

Fortunately their fourth child, Percy Florence, survived.

Percy Shelley drowned in 1822, after visiting Byron and Leigh Hunt. During his cremation onlookers tried to retrieve keepsakes from the flames. Mary salvaged what was left of her husband's

heart, wrapped it in silk, placed it between the pages of his poem *Adonais*, and secreted it in her travelling-desk. It was discovered there almost thirty years later.

The desolate widow returned to London. Her financial situation was precarious, particularly as she had a youngster to support; luckily, Mary was a versatile author and managed to earn a living from writing. Her other novels were: *Valperga* (1823), *The Last Man* (1826), *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (1830), *Lodore* (1835) and *Falkner* (1837). From 1824-40 she also penned short stories, biographies, articles and reviews for journals, and travel narratives. A novella, *Mathilda*, was published posthumously in 1959.

Mary's son Percy proved to be a very decent man. After the author's death on 1 February 1851 her affectionate daughter-in-law created a special shrine for Mary, Shelley and their circle at Boscombe Lodge, near Bournemouth.

The genesis of Frankenstein

In 1816 Lord Byron and his physician, John Polidari, were staying at the Villa Diodati near Geneva. One stormy night in June, they were spending time with Shelley, Mary and Claire. Incessant torrential rain had trapped them indoors, and Byron challenged the group to produce their own ghost stories. They were inspired by

German tales (translated into French), from a collection of volumes called *Fantasmagoriana*. In the preface to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, Mary claimed that she experienced a nightmare in which she pictured a ‘pale student of the unhallowed arts’ and ‘the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out’. In the dream she saw the figure ‘stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion’. ‘At first I thought but of a few pages of a short tale; but Shelley urged me to develop the idea at greater length.’

She knew that the Italian Luigi Galvani had experimented with stimulating the muscles of dead frogs in the 1780s, and was aware that scientists were exploring the possibility of using electrical power to regenerate human corpses. Her childhood home had been visited by the chemists Humphry Davy and William Nicholson, who were interested in galvanic electricity. At the age of fourteen Mary had witnessed some of Davy’s experiments at the Royal Institute, and she described herself as ‘a devout but nearly silent listener’ to Byron and Shelley’s animated discussions about science.

The story

Frankenstein opens in an epistolary style, with letters from Captain Robert Walton to his sister, Margaret. The narrative then switches to Victor Frankenstein. In Gothic novels this technique, termed ‘nesting’, is often used: stories are cradled within stories, as

characters relate their tales.

En route to the North Pole, Walton rescues Victor from the ice. The latter recalls his happy youth in Geneva with his family and his friend, Henry Clerval. At the University of Ingolstadt Victor embarks upon scientific experiments to discover the secret of life, hoping to produce a living creature from body parts. His meddling has tragic consequences. Having achieved his aim, he is horror-stricken at the outcome. Subsequently the creature goes missing. When Victor receives news of his brother's death he guesses who is responsible; however, Justine Moritz is accused and executed for the crime. Victor's guilt is now compounded.

The creature laments that he is lonely. His words are poignant: it becomes apparent that he is not innately evil. To his acute distress, the people he has encountered have reacted with terror and loathing; yet he is desperate to belong to a family. Thus the creature is depicted as an innocent victim who *becomes* malign after being rejected by his maker and by society. He declares: 'I am malicious because I am miserable', and pleads with Victor to fashion a mate for him.

Later Victor destroys the female companion, causing the creature to seek revenge. Henry's violent demise is followed by the murder of Victor's bride, Elizabeth, and his father's death from grief. Victor, in turn, pursues the creature to exact vengeance, which leads to a dramatic confrontation. After Victor dies, the creature

weeps over him. Isolated and remorseful, he departs to face his own fate.

Frankenstein; Or, The Modern Prometheus

Mary Shelley's novel is a complex work that defies classification. She successfully blended realist, Gothic and Romantic elements to produce an enduring literary masterpiece. Her strategy of employing multiple narrators (Walton, Victor, the creature) means that there is not a single consistent viewpoint or message; rather, the text lends itself to a range of interpretations.

It is realistic in detailing Victor's family life, education, career aspirations, intention to marry, and so on; but the sub-title, *The Modern Prometheus*, alerts us to Mary's aim of producing a new 'version' of an ancient Greek myth. In the legend, Prometheus was a Titan who brought enlightenment and knowledge to mankind. The gods punished him when he stole fire from Mount Olympus. He was chained to a rock; every day an eagle tore out and devoured his liver; each night the organ would grow back. There are clear analogies between the stories of Victor and Prometheus: hubris leads to tragedy, and both suffer torments as a consequence of their actions. *Frankenstein* also echoes the Genesis account of Adam and Eve and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Publication and the various editions

Five hundred copies of the first edition were printed, and the text was divided into three volumes. The critical reception was mostly unfavourable. John Croker was damning in the *Quarterly Review* (January 1818):

Our taste and our judgement alike revolt at this kind of writing, and the greater the ability with which it may be executed the worse it is - it inculcates no lesson of conduct, manners, or morality; it cannot mend, and will not even amuse its readers, unless their taste have been deplorably vitiated...

Frankenstein was reprinted in 1823, in two volumes, this time crediting Mary openly.

The first theatre production was Richard Brinsley Peake's *Presumption: or the Fate of Frankenstein* (1823). When Mary came back to London after her husband's death she found that her tale was being staged, with a frightening monster which sprang from a concealed laboratory at the top of a staircase. In her book the scientist who re-animates the corpse has the surname Frankenstein; but by 1830 this appellation was being used for the *creature*. The name 'Frankenstein' gradually became associated with things that were monstrous and threatening. In the Universal

Studios movie of 1931 James Whale directed the famous version starring Boris Karloff. Shelley's text has been adapted for stage and screen many times.

When Mary was writing the Introduction to the 1831 edition she was keen to contradict suspicions that Percy Shelley had been responsible for the novel. She stated:

I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling, to my husband, and yet but for his incitement, it would never have taken the form in which it was presented. From this declaration I must except the preface. As far as I can recollect, it was entirely written by him.'

However, in his pioneering work, *The Original Frankenstein*, Professor Charles E. Robinson has demonstrated that Percy Shelley collaborated with Mary. The first draft is in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Percy acted as a kind of editor by making additions, deletions and other amendments. Robinson has presented both Mary's original version and the revisions. Percy's recommendations affected many aspects of the text, addressing the plot, structure, themes, descriptions and characterizations.

The novel's sympathetic portrayal of the creature inevitably draws attention to the defects in Victor Frankenstein's personality. This is interesting, in view of the belief that the character is partly based

on Percy Shelley, and that the poet actively contributed to the manuscript drafts. It is possible to interpret *Frankenstein* as a critique of the Romantic ideal of the solitary genius.

Mary decided to offer explanations of the changes she made for the 1831 version:

They are principally those of style. I have changed no portion of the story, nor introduced any new ideas or circumstances. I have mended the language where it was so bald as to interfere with the interest of the narrative; and these changes occur almost exclusively in the beginning of the first volume. Throughout they are entirely confined to such parts as are mere adjuncts to the story, leaving the core and substance of it untouched.'

In fact the novel underwent some notable changes for the 1831 edition, which was published as a single volume in the Bentley's Standard Novels series. For example, it places greater emphasis on the inexorability of fate, and Victor is described in a more benevolent way. Even slight alterations can be illuminating. In the 1818 text it is stated that Victor and Elizabeth are first cousins. Many readers would have considered it improper for them to marry. When Mary revised the text for republication in 1831, the reference to their blood relationship was removed; instead Elizabeth is said to be adopted by the Frankensteins.

Percy Shelley's thoughts about the novel were published posthumously in the review *On Frankenstein* (in the *Athenaeum*, 10 November 1832):

Treat a person ill and he will become wicked. Requite affection with scorn; - let one being be selected for whatever cause as the refuse of his kind - divide him, a social being, from society, and you impose upon him the irresistible obligations - malevolence and selfishness. It is thus that, too often in society, those who are best qualified to be its benefactors and its ornaments are branded by some accident with scorn, and changed, by neglect and solitude of heart, into a scourge and a curse.

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