FRANKENSTEIN, OR THE MODERN PROMETHEUS By Mary Shelley

Mary Shelley - Life and works



Mary Godwin was born in 1797 and was the daughter of the important personalities of the time:

the mother was Mary Wollstonecraft, a very important feminist who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). She was one of the first feminists to analyse and be committed to the role of women in society and their discrimination.

The father was **William Godwin**, a famous anarchist and philosopher.

They were both interested in social issues and problems and Mary Shelley will inherit such attitude and will show it in her novel.

Mary Shelley - Life and works



Her childhood and her young adult life were not easy: her mother died when she was born and her father later remarried. Mary Shelley's stepmother and stepsister will always be cause of sufferings and troubles for her.

If her emotional life was troubled, her intellectual life was stimulated: at her father's house intellectuals and romantic poets gathered and she was part of these meetings.

In one of them she met the love of her life: **Percy Bysshe Shelley**.

Mary Shelley - Life and works

Percy Bysshe Shelley was a romantic poet and was married with two children. Despite that, the two fell in love and eloped to Switzerland.

Mary Shelley's father suffered and they were rejected and excluded from social life in Switzerland. Some years later, P.B. Shelley's first wife committed suicide.

Mary and Percy had many children but only one of them, Percy Florence, survived.

The coupled travelled a lot in Europe and finally settled in Italy. In 1822, in Lerici, P.B. Shelley sailed with his boat and never came back. His body was found ten days later.

In 1823, Mary Shelley went back to England and died in 1851.





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Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus - Origins

WHERE \rightarrow Geneva

WHEN \rightarrow 1816

WHO \rightarrow Mary Shelley, P.B. Shelley, Lord Byron, John William Polidori

 \rightarrow the group used to spend time reading German ghost stories by the fire

 \rightarrow Byron suggested that each of them should write their own horror story

Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus - Origins

 \rightarrow Mary Shelley wanted to create a story which "would speak of 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..."

→ she had no inspiration for days, until she heard Byron and Shelley talk about recent scientific experiments, including the one by the Italian Luigi Galvani: <u>he</u> had managed to animate the legs of a dead frog with electricity

→ eventually she knew what to write about and started her novel. Hers would have been the perfect horror story because the idea scared her first: *"What terrified me will terrify others"*, she said 6

Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus - Plot

- Robert Walton is an explorer in the North Pole: he is talking of his expedition to his sister writing her letters, when he sees a person in the middle of nowhere
- the scientist Victor Frankenstein is introduced: he starts telling his own story
- Frankenstein says that, to satisfy his thirst for knowledge, he created a human being by joining parts selected from corpses and animated by eletricity
- this creature ran away and gradually became a murderer, killing members of Frankenstein's family
- Frankenstein and the monster meet more than once, but the scientist now wants to end him in the North Pole, where he had hidden
- in the end, Frankenstein dies, **destroyed by the deeds of his monster** and the monster himself disappears

Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus - Plot

The story is not told chronologically, the novel is <u>epistolary</u> and there are three different narrative lines:

- 1. WALTON writes to his sister
- 2. FRANKENSTEIN tells his story to Walton who informs his sister
- 3. MONSTER tells his story, inside Frankenstein's narrative
- → every story is directed to Walton's sister, Margaret Saville, whose initials, MS, are those of Mary Shelley



Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus - Epigraph

EPIGRAPH: short quotation put at the beginning of a poem or of a book to suggest its theme

"Did I request the, Maker, from my clay To mould me Man? Did I solicit thee From darkness to promote me?"

Book X, Paradise Lost, J.MILTON

Did I ask you to create me? No, you wanted to create me.

Themes of the novel:

• GOING BEYOND THE LIMITS IMPOSED ON MEN

• CRIME AGAINST NATURE AND RESPONSIBILITY



Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus Going beyond the limits imposed on men

Prometheus was a Titan in the Greek mythology: he stole the fire to the Gods to give it to human beings. This act was seen as defiance: he overstepped the limits imposed on men and as a punishment, he was chained to a mountain in the Caucasus where an eagle perpetually ate his liver, which regrew every time.



Victor Frankenstein is seen as a modern Prometheus because he too oversteps the limits imposed on human beings: he creates life assembling human parts taken from dead bodies.

He is driven by his **thirst of knowledge**: he wants to push further the boundaries of human knowledge.

He will be punished too, with the death of all those whom he loves.

BUT WHY IS HE PUNISHED?

Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus Going beyond the limits imposed on men

THE CREATION OF THE MONSTER

- 1. Who is the narrator of the story?
- 2. A spark of being: what do you think it is? How does it show the influence of Galvani's experiment on Shelley's imagination?
- 3. How does the narrator describe the creature? What are his feeling towards it? Find the words in the text that show these feelings.
- 4. How does the narrator react to his creation?
- 5. Rewrite the scene from the perspective of the creature: you will only have to focus on the final lines of the story, after it comes to life. Focus on the perceptions and emotions of the creature once it is alive and once it is aware of the reaction of its creator.

Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus Crime against nature and responsibility

Frankenstein's **crime** \rightarrow he defies the natural laws and creates life (=Prometheus)

 \rightarrow BUT this is not the reason why he is punished

Frankenstein fails and is therefore punished because he is not responsible for his actions, he is not able to take responsibilities for his creation.

- → the monster looks like the real evil, when its guilt originally derives from Frankenstein's guilt (when Frankenstein sees what he has created, he leaves the creature and does not take care of it)
- → what Frankenstein thinks his guilt is: the creation of a horrible creature, of a killer (going beyond the limits imposed on men)
- → what Frankenstein's real guilt is: the rejection of **his** creature and thus the transformation of the creature into a monster

"It was dark when I awoke; I felt cold also, and half-frightened as it were instinctively, finding myself so desolate. Before I had quitted your apartment, on a sensation of cold, I had covered myself with some clothes; but these were insufficient to secure me from the dews of night. <u>I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but, feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept</u>."

"One of the best of these [cottages] I entered; but I had hardly placed my foot within the door, before <u>the children shrieked</u>, and one of the women <u>fainted</u>. The whole village was roused; <u>some fled</u>, <u>some attacked me</u>, <u>until</u>, <u>grievously bruised by stones and many other kinds of missile weapons</u>, I escaped to the open country, and fearfully took refuge in a low hovel, quite bare, and making a wretched appearance after the palaces I had beheld in the village."

 \rightarrow WHAT IS THE REACTION OF PEOPLE WHEN THEY SEE THE CREATURE?

"I remembered too well the treatment I had suffered the night before from the barbarous villagers, and resolved, whatever course of conduct I might hereafter think it right to pursue, that for the present <u>I would remain quietly</u> in my hovel, watching, and endeavouring to discover the motives which influenced their actions."

 \rightarrow WHAT IS THE REACTION OF THE CREATURE?

"A considerable period elapsed before I discovered one of the causes of the uneasiness of this amiable family; it was poverty: and they [a blind father and his daughter and son] suffered that evil in a very distressing degree. Their nourishment consisted entirely of the vegetables of their garden, and the milk of one cow, which gave very little during the winter, when its masters could scarcely procure food to support it. [...] for several times they placed food before the old man, when they reserved none for themselves. This trait of kindness moved me sensibly. I had been accustomed, during the night, to steal a part of their store for my own consumption; but when I found that in doing this I inflicted pain on the cottagers, I abstained, and satisfied myself with berries, nuts, and roots, which I gathered from a neighbouring wood. [...] I discovered also another means through which I was enabled to assist their labours. I found that the youth spent a great part of each day in collecting wood for the family fire; and, during the night, I often took his tools, the use of which I quickly discovered, and brought home firing sufficient for the consumption of several days."

→ WHAT CAN YOU ASSUME FROM THE CREATURE'S ATTITUDE?
→ WHAT'S ITS REAL NATURE?

THE CREATURE HAD SPENT SOME TIME TALKING TO THE OLD BLIND FATHER, WHO CAN'T SEE THE REAL PHYSICAL ASPECT OF THE CREATURE

"At that instant the cottage door was opened, and Felix, Safie, and Agatha entered. <u>Who can describe their horror and consternation on beholding</u> <u>me?</u> Agatha fainted; and Safie, unable to attend to her friend rushed out of the cottage. Felix darted forward, and with supernatural force tore me from his father, to whose knees I clung: in a transport of fury, he dashed me to the ground, and struck me violently with a stick. <u>I could have torn him limb from limb, as the lion rends the antelope. But my heart sunk</u> within me as with bitter sickness, and I refrained. I saw him on the point of repeating his blow, when, overcome by pain and anguish, I quitted the cottage, and in the general tumult escaped unperceived to my hovel."

→ WHAT IS THE REACTION OF THE YOUNGER MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY?
→ WHY DO THEY REACT LIKE THIS?

"<u>Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live? Why, in that instant, did I not extinguish</u> <u>the spark of existence which you had so wantonly bestowed?</u> I know not; despair had not yet taken possession of me; <u>my feelings were those of rage and revenge</u>. I could with pleasure have destroyed the cottage and its inhabitants, and have glutted myself with their shrieks and misery.

[...]

From that moment I declared everlasting war against the species, and, more than all, against him who had formed me, and sent me forth to this insupportable misery."

→ WHAT IS THE FINAL REACTION OF THE CREATURE?
→ WHY DOES HE GET TO SUCH RESOLUTION?

Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus Classical canon ans social prejudice

- \rightarrow the monster is like a creature in a primitive state
- \rightarrow the monster can be referred to as **CREATURE**, with neutral terms
- \rightarrow the creature is left alone, **abandoned**
- \rightarrow the creature wants the company of other people and looks for it
- against Frankenstein's first impressions, the creature is a good being
- despite its horrible appearance, the creature is a good being
- → traditionally, beauty was associated to good nature and ugliness to evil BEAUTIFUL=GOOD VS UGLY=EVIL
- → men start treating it as a monster, because of its horrible appearance
 → the creature becomes a MONSTER by behaving as a monster

"We may not part until you have promised to comply with my requisition. I am alone, and miserable; man will not associate with me; but one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me. My companion must be of the same species, and have the same defects. This being you must create."

[...]

"I do refuse it," I replied; "and no torture shall ever extort a consent from me. You may render me the most miserable of men, but you shall never make me base in my own eyes. Shall I create another like yourself, whose joint wickedness might desolate the world. Begone! I have answered you; you may torture me, but I will never consent." It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse **a spark of being** into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form?

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 luxuriances 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.

The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but 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 bed-chamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep.

[...]

I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window-shutters, I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, and rushed down stairs. I took refuge in the court-yard belonging to the house which I inhabited; where I remained during the rest of the night, walking up and down in the greatest agitation, listening attentively, catching and fearing each sound as if it were to announce the approach of the demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life.