

FRANKENSTEIN

Literature in the 19th century

As the 18th century began to turn over a new leaf into the 19th century, literature too did a volte face and turned its back upon its then existing norms. From the immensely romantic and stylized literature of the past century, which embraced the improbable and the illusionary, literature of this new era i.e., the 19th century, turned to realism in a big way. The umbrella of realism covered under its shade realisms of different ilk like social, socialist, kitchen sink and natural, to name but a few. Realistic literature in principle abjured and shunned into all subject matter that was unreal. In other words, it accepted, adopted and garnered only those things to its bosom that were the matter of everyday life. Furthermore, it also dealt with that which pertained to the lives of the common people. Everything and anything that was perceivable with the help of the senses was the new cause célèbre for literature and welcomed with open arms by the “new age” authors.

A Few Famous Authors

The Victorian era which was what this era was known as, produced rather prolifically, authors whose names have been etched forever in posterity. Mary Shelley, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Walt Whitman, Charlotte Bronte, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Louisa May Alcott, Thoreau and Jane Austen are but a very few of the stalwarts whose names will always shine like beacons in the literary sky. They are all known for amassing and producing fabulous works of fiction, which are not only eternal in their appeal but also path breaking in their content. For which lover of literature could possibly not have delved deep and emerged, satiated and replenished in their souls from books like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, *Walden Pond*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Nature* and the anthology of *Little Women*? All the authors of this time wrote works of fiction, non-fiction, biographies and autobiographies that dealt with the extant realities of their times. It could be anything from issues relating to women, children, nature, the daily wage earners, the street walkers and to even the lowliest of the low.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was born in Somers in England into a household of educators and philosophers in 1797 on the 30th of August. Unfortunately, when she was but a babe in arms, her mother passed away leaving the baby to be brought up by her father and elder sister. When the time came for her education, help came in the guise of her private tutor. On her father's remarriage, Mary's feathers were continually ruffled by her step mother and as both of them were consistently at loggerheads it was deemed fit that Mary be sent to reside with William Baxter, who

was a known radical and a close friend of her father as well. By the time she was fifteen, Mary had chrysalised into a bold young lady with a ravenous thirst for knowledge who embarked upon a torrid relationship with a much-married Percy Bysshe Shelley. Naturally this caused them to be ostracized by society and as a result they were perpetually on the run. But their fortunes too took a turn for the better and there came a time when Mary and Percy did get married and parent a son as well. The author in her penned quite a few memorable novels of which *Valperga*, *Mathilda*, *The Last Man*, *Lodore*, *Falkner* and *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* are notable for more than one reason and were very popular in their time.

The Story of Frankenstein (the modern Prometheus)

The novel *Frankenstein* was conceived rather incongruously by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, in a dream. It just so happened that once, when the family was holidaying at Lake Geneva, an inordinately wet summer kept them confined indoors most of the time. Recoursing to reading and recounting German ghost stories, on these dismal days, proved to be their best bet and indeed a boon for this little group that consisted of the Shelley's, their son, John Polidori, Claire Clairmont and Lord Byron. One such afternoon Lord Byron proposed that each of them pen a story that dealt with either the supernatural or ghostly shenanigans at the very least. Even so, it was days before Mary could come up with even a germ of a story, much to her mortification.

One evening the gathered group and Mary were exploring ideas for Mary's story. Mary had a Eureka moment and began to explore an electrifyingly new idea that she had come across. Galvanisation was a thrilling new concept which had lately been explored by scientific students. It allowed for the passage of electrical currents through the body to get it twitching. That night as she slept, this very thought concretised as a dream which finally resulted in the novel *Frankenstein*. However, when it was first published in 1818 Mary was rather reticent about giving her name to the book which had not just a scientifically rather unorthodox, but was also religiously, an almost blasphemous.

The story begins as a series of correspondences from a Robert Walton to his sister, a Mrs. Margaret Saville. Robert is at sea in the higher reaches of Russia where the view harkens him no end. Robert had not always been a sailor, he became one to overcome the ennui that stifled him. It saddened him but the reasons for his sadness were beyond him. Quite like Antonio's in the famed Shakespearian drama *The Merchant of Venice*.

Ant. In sooth, I know not why I am so sad:

It wearies me; you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn;
And such a want wit sadness makes of me
That I have much ado to know myself (The Oxford Shakespeare/Act1, Sc.1)

The life of a seafarer, buffeted by adventure, was very agreeable to him except for the fact that he yearned to meet a kindred soul, someone who would understand him and reciprocate his thoughts and innermost feelings. He voiced his angst to his sister " ...my dear sister, but I bitterly feel the want of a friend, I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a gentle yet capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own..." (Frankenstein-6).

His prayers of meeting the kind of the person he is searching for are answered when Victor Frankenstein is delivered almost on to his doorstep one morning, by the kind hand of providence. "... all the sailors busy on one side of the vessel, apparently talking to someone in the sea. It was, in fact, a sledge...but there was a human being within it ...A European...his limbs were nearly frozen, and his body dreadfully emaciated by fatigue and suffering." (Frankenstein/12) Within a few days though good nourishment helped him to recover, he tended to remain morose and glum. With the passage of time however, his natural reticence started wearing down and taking Robert into his confidence he regaled the story of his extraordinary life.

Victor Frankenstein had been born into a noble Genevese family which had land holdings across the length and breadth of Europe. As the apple of his parent's eye, he wanted for nothing and as he regaled to Robert, "My mother's tender caresses and my father's smile of benevolent pleasure while regarding me are my first recollections." (Frankenstein23) Life became even richer and better and the cup of the Frankenstein family brimmed over with happiness at the addition another brother and the adoption of young Elizabeth. Of course, one must mention here the other occupant of Victor's affections, his dear friend Clerval.

The young Victor joined Ingolstadt University at seventeen and once there he came in touch with the two professors. M. Krempe who was his professor of natural philosophy and M. Waldman, the professor of modern chemistry. Together they uprooted all the misconceptions that he had harboured in his bosom due to reading the extremely outdated books of Cornelius Agrippa,

Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus. He was told by his eminent professors at Ingolstadt that, “the ancient teachers...promised impossibilities and performed nothing. The modern masters promise very little... They penetrate into the recesses of nature and show how she works in her hiding places. They ascend into the heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe...” (Frankenstein40)

At Ingolstadt that Frankenstein was seized by an idea most profound. It seized and consumed him till there was naught that he could do but follow it through. He simply had to roll up his sleeves and get down to the task of creating a being and also infuse it with life. For as he told Robert in their little shared cabin on the ship, “I doubted very much at first whether I should attempt the creation of a being like myself...but my imagination was too much exalted ...I doubted not that I should ultimately succeed. I prepared myself for a series of reverses...I considered the improvement which everyday takes place in science and mechanics, I was encouraged...I began” (Frankenstein47)

For two years, he abjured and shunned his family, his friends, his body along with all its needs and even the beautiful bounties of nature that had so enchanted and enthralled him before. He recounted to Robert that, “My father made no reproach ... of my silence... Winter, spring and summer passed away during my labours... So deeply was I engrossed in my occupation.” (Frankenstein 51) Till at last one night, his creation came to life. Alas! The moment that should have suffused him with boundless joy, filled him with repugnance and abhorrence, for when he beheld the monster, it was nigh about impossible for him to find one shred of joy within himself at so profoundly ghastly a creation. Frankenstein said during the recounting of those moments, “I had worked hard for 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 horror and disgust filled my heart.” (Frankenstein 52)

So, he did the next best thing that he could do. He turned his back on the gigantic monstrosity that he had carefully nurtured and created over the past two years and escaped back to the world that he had abjured for the past two years. Unfortunately, just when happiness seemed within grasp again, a letter from his father informed him about the murder of little William. This made him realize that the evil monster was still hard on his trail and also the murderer of his brother. Once again Frankenstein drew into himself; once again he turned his back on the people who loved him

the most. Once again, he abandoned all the joys that life had laid out for him and escaped to the village of Chamounix. On beholding the icy vastness of the mountain ranges he prayed to their spirits to, " ...take me, as your companion, away from the joys of life." (Frankenstein103). And that was when he beheld the monster again.

Bitterly and roundly did the creator and the creation hurl accusations at each other. The former for the murder of his little brother William, while the latter denounced him roundly for creating him and then leaving him untended and uncared for at the mercy of mankind. Said the monster to him, " ...am miserable beyond all living things!... You purpose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life? ...Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind." (Frankenstein104) when at last the daemon had vented out his anger and his angst, his frustration and his chagrin at being denied even a modicum of love and understanding by each and every human being whose path he happened to cross; he ended off by saying that he would trouble no man ever again provided Frankenstein created for him a companion to love and to cherish. Understanding the pathos underlying the pathetic condition of the monster, Frankenstein at last agreed to create a lady monster for him. However, a new day was also another day and once again Frankenstein embarked on one of his famously long travels, to buy himself some time because he was willing to try anything to procrastinate the inevitable creation of the second monster.

However, a promise is a promise and if nothing else Victor Frankenstein was a gentleman who kept his word, "I now also began to collect materials necessary for my new creation, and this was to me like the torture of single drops of water continually falling on the head. Every thought that was devoted to it was an extreme anguish, and every word that I spoke in allusion to it caused my lips to quiver, and my heart to palpitate." (Frankenstein178) And yet quelling every qualm he did finally create a she monster for the monster.

When all was done and complete and wanting only was the spark of life to awaken her, hideous doubts began to assail him: "I was now about to form another being of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten times more malignant than her mate and delight, for its own sake in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighborhood of man and hide himself in the deserts, but she had not...They might even hate each other; the creature who already lived loathed his own deformity, and might he not conceive a greater abhorrence for it when it came before him in a female form?...Had I right , for my own benefit, to inflict this curse

upon everlasting generations...I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace at the price, perhaps, of the existence of the whole human race?" (Frankenstein 187)

At the end of his reverie it just so happened that he looked up and gazed with a start upon the monster, which in any case was never too far behind him. This vision once again filled him with repugnance and without further ado or remorse Frankenstein willfully destroyed the she monster. The monster then promised to make his creator's life so full of misery that only death would offer him final salvation. The monster uttered ominously just as he was leaving "It is well. I go; but remember, I shall be with you on your wedding night." (Frankenstein190) And with those dread laced words he disappeared into the night.

It is said that time cures everything and for Frankenstein too as the vagaries of life took over, he slowly but surely put his past life behind him. Till one fine day when he reunited with his father after being wrongly interred in an Irish prison. But then too misery dogged his footsteps as he was informed about the murder of his dear friend Clerval. Once again Frankenstein understood only too clearly that none other but the monster had murdered his dear friend as well. The only mitigating aspect in his life at this time was his father and of course Elizabeth's insistence that they marry as soon as possible. Brushing aside his fears and taking all possible precautions, Frankenstein prepared to wed his beloved Elizabeth.

The day of the wedding dawned. "Elizabeth seemed happy; my tranquil demeanor contributed greatly to calm her mind. But on the day...she was melancholy, and a presentiment of evil pervaded her; and perhaps she thought of the dreadful secret which I had promised to reveal to her on the following day..." (Frankenstein220) the wedding took place and all was as well as it should be. The weather was fair, everyone who had assembled for their nuptials, guests and officials alike were happy for this young and so obviously in love, couple. The sun was shining in the heavens and all seemed well with the world. Except for Elizabeth, who try as she might, could not shake off the feeling of doom and seemed rather inordinately down crested most of the day. Frankenstein in the meanwhile had taken the utmost care to make sure that there was not one nook or cranny which was left unattended and unbarred. Nothing was left by him to chance, and every precaution had been undertaken by him to keep the monster out.

Yet, something just would not let him enjoy the day to the hilt. Some presentiment of evil and impending doom made him explain to Elizabeth". This night, and all will be safe, but this night is dreadful, very dreadful." (Frankenstein223). And then within minutes of Elizabeth's retirement to their bedroom, a couple of chilling screams from Elizabeth made him rush helter skelter to it , only to find , "...the body of Elizabeth, my love, my wife, so lately living..." (Frankenstein-224) there was nothing much to be done after that because after all the hue and cry and the shock following dreadful murder's aftermath had died down, all that remained for Frankenstein was the utter and abject sadness which was thereafter to remain his only faithful companion.

Once again in search of the monster Victor scoured and sourced all the places where he might be found. Till finally, he was saved at sea by Walton's ship and that was where his tortured soul finally passed away. Not unsurprisingly however, here too the monster did not let go of him easily. Perhaps of all those who mourned Frankenstein, the monster mourned him the most bitterly. His grief in fact was boundless because not just had Victor been freed from all earthly troubles (and that included the monster as well) but with the passing away of Frankenstein, too had passed away forever the littlest chance that there might have been of the creation of a lady monster. With deep repentance and remonstrations did the monster mourn the demise of his creator because deep in heart of hearts that Frankenstein had suffered irreparably only because of his vile and heinous actions. His boundless guilt would offer him no reprieve ever and thus after he had poured his heart out to Robert (who was also present in the cabin then) the story and the saga of Frankenstein ended with the monster escaping into the night after pledging to immolate him.

Allusions to Prometheus

The mythical Prometheus was a crafty Titan who after creating man did everything in his power to aid him. He stole the best part of the feast from the gods to nurture his creation and then came into direct conflict with Zeus when he stole the sacred fire from under his very nose and presented it to the humans, in a fennel stalk. A very incensed Zeus devised a hideously painful punishment for him by tying him to a stake on top of a mountain, where an eagle would come by and feast on his ever generating liver.

Frankenstein is referred to as the modern Prometheus because he aimed like his predecessor to emulate the gods themselves and create a living being. The monster that he created was like the eagle who wouldn't let him be in peace and tortured him literally to death.

The Plot

Frankenstein's plot was remarkably forward and modern for its time because not just was it causal in its sequence, it was also tightly knit in its telling. The action segues seamlessly from scene to scene. The main characters are the creators of their own destiny who create their own incidents as well as the events that arise out of them. There is no unseen factor or even a supernatural factor that accounts for the mishaps that occur in their lives. Hence, all of Frankenstein's sorrows arise from his overwhelming desire to emulate the penultimate creator. He does create and not just the monster but all of the miseries that follow him thereafter. It begins with a curiosity which crescendos up to a stridently self-flagellating action on the part of Frankenstein, building up finally to his creating the monster and then naturally at the end is the inevitable death of both the mainstays in the story. Thus, the parabola of construction and the Aristotelian concept of catharsis are faithfully adhered to.

The plot maintains its integrity and its thrill but at an immense cost to Frankenstein. The plot impoverishes and saps all the characters of their vital life force as it rolls forward like the inevitable juggernaut. It is not fantastical. It is not prophetic either; rather it is a realistic plot where the realities of daily life are prodded and stoked to highlight the making of a consummate tragedy.

The setting

The story of Frankenstein has mesmerized readers ever since it was first published in 1818. It was first published without its young author's name, because at merely twenty years of age It is intensely gothic in nature with dollops of the romantic elements to impart it the requisite flavor of a tragedy. Thematically it is set mostly in the cold and often icy climes of Italy, Germany, England, Scotland, Russia and Upper Europe. Then there are the unnatural deaths and even murders which set the feeling and the tone of the book at subzero levels emotionally. The reader is often investitured by the Brrrr...factor on reading the book and this coupled with the overall atmosphere of doom and personal angst of the characters, further deepens the feeling of foreboding and despondence as the story carries on.

Though the setting is mainly sere, it does have its uplifting moments. It moves in almost montage-like sequences to the salubrious climes of southern Europe during the good times in the story and that is when the happiness quotient is introduced to uplift its mood.

The Theme

Thematically it explores the biblical concept of the fallen angel Lucifer and also the Garden of Paradise. Like Lucifer who aimed to usurp God's throne and was tossed out of heaven into hell for his pains, the monster too was doomed to a lonely and miserable life of roaming the earth without a soul to call his own. All because he aimed to be like his creator and have a woman to call his own and thereafter parent a race of their own.

The next biblical allusion that suffuses the story is that of the Garden of Paradise. God warned Adam and Eve from eating the fruits of the tree of knowledge but curiosity won the day and they were henceforth banned from their paradise. Frankenstein too could not withhold his curiosity and sought to empty the cup of scientific knowledge, and in the event hastened his own doom.

The thematic concept of the monster itself was fashioned from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and has shades of Shakespeare's Caliban from *The Tempest*

Critical Analysis

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* competently envelopes the glaring dichotomy between Nature and Science that had begun to fracture society in its era. The monster being a product of science can only forever yearn for societal acceptance, however as he is not naturally born, that acceptance is eternally denied to him. The underlying message in the novel is clear. Nature is Eternal Truth and Science can at best only harbor aspirations to emulate it, it can never be an alternate Truth, at par with Nature. The monster and Victor are alter egos, each reflecting the discrepancy of the other's character. Both have problems communicating with society. The former desperately wants to communicate but lacks the necessary skills (at least in the beginning), while the latter, perhaps because of an overwhelming ego, finds it difficult to relate to normal people. Here too the novel reflects the emerging influences of Freudian psychoanalysis and the Darwinian code of the survival of the fittest.

Written by Mary Shelley when she was just nineteen years old and published anonymously in 1818, *Frankenstein* is one of the most recognizable and enduring novels in English literature. The story began as Shelley's contribution to a friendly competition among several of her literary cohorts. While on holiday in Geneva, Switzerland, a period that Shelley later characterized as "a wet, ungenial summer" during which "incessant rain often confined us for days to the house," she and her companions--her husband Percy

Bysshe Shelley, Lord George Gordon Byron, and Dr. John Polidori--challenged one another to write a horror story. Her tale of an obsessed scientist who creates and then abandons a human being, thus provoking it to horrible vengeance, has maintained the attention of readers and critics since its publication and has vastly overshadowed Shelley's other works of literature. Initial critical reaction to *Frankenstein* was often unfavorable, but in the twentieth century critics began to analyze the novel from a variety of new perspectives and to recognize in it many devices and themes which are now presented as evidence that Shelley's self-described "hideous progeny" was ahead of its time.

Plot and Major Characters

Frankenstein is structured as a series of framing narratives. The novel opens in the form of four letters from Captain Robert Walton, an explorer on an expedition to the North Pole, to his sister in England. In the last letter, Walton relays that an exhausted man in a dog sledge has strayed toward the ship on an ice floe. Walton and his men convince him to board the ship, and the narrative shifts to the perspective of this man--Dr. Victor Frankenstein--as he recounts his life story to Walton. Frankenstein's childhood, in Geneva, is happy and privileged. Born to a distinguished family, his parents are kind and he enjoys the company of Elizabeth (his cousin in the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein*, adopted sister in the 1831 edition), and best friend, Henry.

From a young age Frankenstein displays an interest in science. After the untimely death of his mother, he becomes consumed with unraveling the mystery of life. He furthers his scientific knowledge at the University of Ingolstadt, Bavaria, and immerses himself in a secret project: resuscitating the dead. Working obsessively, he brings to life a man stitched together from body parts harvested from corpses. He is horrified with the monstrous result and flees from it, then soon falls ill from shock and overwork, taking several months to recover. More than a year has passed when Frankenstein receives word that his youngest brother, William, has been murdered. Frankenstein departs for Geneva immediately. As he approaches home, he catches a glimpse of his creation in the woods and is convinced that the creature is William's killer, but tells no one. Justine

Moritz, the Frankenstein family's maid, has been accused of committing the crime and, based on circumstantial evidence, is convicted and executed. Frankenstein is wracked with guilt knowing that the creature he created caused the deaths of two innocents. Attempting to find peace, he goes to the mountains.

One day, alone on a glacier, Frankenstein is approached by the creature. The story switches to the creature's narrative as he explains to Frankenstein his descent into despair and rage. Rejected by his creator and without guidance, the monster attempts to do good, but is treated harshly by humans he encounters and begins to realize how very shunned and abhorred he is. Enraged, he curses his life, his creator, and mankind. When the creature discovers a boy in the woods, he hopes that the child might be young enough to be unprejudiced toward him, but the child responds to him with shrill screams. Upon realizing that the boy is Frankenstein's brother, the creature grasps his throat, strangling him. As the creature's narrative ends, he demands that Frankenstein make a companion for him, threatening to destroy Frankenstein if he refuses. Frankenstein reluctantly agrees. He departs for England, accompanied by Henry, to learn of any recent scientific developments. Frankenstein tells his father that the purpose of this trip is to see the world before settling down, and that he will marry Elizabeth upon returning to Geneva.

The creature follows Frankenstein to London, and then on to an isolated island in the Orkneys where Frankenstein has set up a workshop, having left Henry behind in Scotland. After half-completing the female creature, Frankenstein destroys her, fearing the consequences of completing her. The creature vows revenge, saying ominously, "I shall be with you on your wedding-night," and departs. Frankenstein disposes of all evidence of the workshop and female creature, and leaves the island. When he reaches land, he is accused of the murder of a man that has washed ashore. The murder victim is Henry--he has been strangled. Frankenstein, raving and feverish, is imprisoned but acquitted of the crime. He returns to Geneva and he and Elizabeth are quickly married. They sail to an inn in Evian and, minding the creature's ominous warning, Frankenstein suggests that Elizabeth retire to their room; meanwhile, he prowls the inn, watching for any sign of the creature. Hearing a scream, Frankenstein rushes to the room and is devastated to find that Elizabeth has been strangled. Frankenstein returns to Geneva,

and after his father learns of Elizabeth's murder, he dies of grief. Frankenstein vows to kill the monster he has created. He pursues his progeny to the Arctic Circle, where he encounters Walton. The novel ends with a second set of letters written by Walton. Frankenstein, who had been ill and weakened from cold when found by Walton and his shipmates, deteriorates and dies. Later, Walton finds the creature in the room where Frankenstein lies in state. Walton regards the creature with anger and fear. The creature expresses his suffering, remorse, and self-loathing, and then departs, intending to die.

s monster to life. The monster proceeds to kill Victor's youngest brother, best friend, and wife; he also indirectly causes the deaths of two other innocents, including Victor's father. Though torn by remorse, shame, and guilt, Victor refuses to admit to anyone the horror of what he has created, even as he sees the ramifications of his creative act spiraling out of control.

Victor changes over the course of the novel from an innocent youth fascinated by the prospects of science into a disillusioned, guilt-ridden man determined to destroy the fruits of his arrogant scientific endeavor. Whether as a result of his desire to attain the godlike power of creating new life or his avoidance of the public arenas in which science is usually conducted, Victor is doomed by a lack of humanness. He cuts himself off from the world and eventually commits himself entirely to an animalistic obsession with revenging himself upon the monster.

At the end of the novel, having chased his creation ever northward, Victor relates his story to Robert Walton and then dies. With its multiple narrators and, hence, multiple perspectives, the novel leaves the reader with contrasting interpretations of Victor: classic mad scientist, transgressing all boundaries without concern, or brave adventurer into unknown scientific lands, not to be held responsible for the consequences of his explorations.

Victor Frankenstein

Victor's life story is at the heart of *Frankenstein*. A young Swiss boy, he grows up in Geneva reading the works of the ancient and outdated alchemists, a background that serves him ill when he attends university at Ingolstadt. There he learns about modern science and, within a few years, masters all that his professors have to teach him. He becomes fascinated with the "secret of life," discovers it, and brings a hideous monster to life. The monster proceeds to kill Victor's youngest brother, best friend, and wife; he also indirectly causes the deaths of two other innocents, including Victor's father. Though torn by remorse, shame, and guilt, Victor refuses to admit to anyone the horror of what he has created, even as he sees the ramifications of his creative act spiraling out of control.

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The Monster

The monster is Victor Frankenstein's creation, assembled from old body parts and strange chemicals, animated by a mysterious spark. He enters life eight feet tall and enormously strong but with the mind of a newborn. Abandoned by his creator and confused, he tries to integrate himself into society, only to be shunned universally. Looking in the mirror, he realizes his physical grotesqueness, an aspect of his persona that blinds society to his initially gentle, kind nature. Seeking revenge on his creator, he kills Victor's younger brother. After Victor destroys his work on the female monster meant to ease the monster's solitude, the monster murders Victor's best friend and then his new wife.

While Victor feels unmitigated hatred for his creation, the monster shows that he is not a purely evil being. The monster's eloquent narration of events (as provided by Victor) reveals his remarkable sensitivity and benevolence. He assists a group of poor peasants and saves a girl from drowning, but because of his outward appearance, he is rewarded only with beatings and disgust. Torn between vengefulness and compassion, the monster ends up lonely and tormented by remorse. Even the death of his creator-turned-would-be-destroyer offers only bittersweet relief: joy because Victor has caused him so much suffering, sadness because Victor is the only person with whom he has had any sort of relationship.

Robert Walton

Walton's letters to his sister form a frame around the main narrative, Victor Frankenstein's tragic story. Walton captains a North Pole-bound ship that gets trapped between sheets of ice. While waiting for the ice to thaw, he and his crew pick up Victor, weak and emaciated from his long chase after the monster. Victor recovers somewhat, tells Walton the story of his life, and then dies. Walton laments the death of a man with whom he felt a strong, meaningful friendship beginning to form.

Walton functions as the conduit through which the reader hears the story of Victor and his monster. However, he also plays a role that parallels Victor's in many ways. Like Victor, Walton is an explorer, chasing after that "country of eternal light"—unpossessed knowledge. Victor's influence on him is paradoxical: one moment he exhorts Walton's almost-mutinuous men to stay the path courageously, regardless of danger; the next, he serves as an abject example of the dangers of heedless scientific ambition. In his ultimate decision to terminate his treacherous pursuit, Walton serves as a foil (someone whose traits or actions contrast with, and thereby highlight, those of another character) to Victor, either not obsessive enough to risk almost-certain death or not courageous enough to allow his passion to drive him.

Elizabeth Lavenza

Elizabeth is Frankenstein's adopted sister and his wife. She is also a mother-figure: when Frankenstein's real mother is dying, she says that Elizabeth "must supply my place." Elizabeth fills many roles in Frankenstein's life, so when the Monster kills her, Frankenstein is deprived of almost every form of female companionship at once.

Some critics consider Elizabeth a vague, unrealistic character who is far less developed than the male characters in the novel. One reason Elizabeth may seem insubstantial is that Frankenstein, the narrator, doesn't see her very clearly. When he does see her, it's as a possession: "[...]looked upon Elizabeth as mine." Elizabeth dies because at a crucial moment Frankenstein overlooks her entirely. The Monster tells him "I will be with you on

your wedding night” but it doesn’t occur to Frankenstein that the Monster is threatening Elizabeth.

Henry Clerval

Clerval’s story runs parallel to Frankenstein’s, illustrating the connection between Frankenstein’s outsized ambition and the more commonplace ambitions of ordinary men. Clerval is first described as a boy who loved “enterprise, hardship and even danger, for its own sake.” Like Walton, Clerval shares Frankenstein’s desire to achieve great things at any cost. Also like Frankenstein, Clerval makes a discovery at university. Clerval believes he has found “the means of materially assisting the progress of European colonization and trade” in India. Frankenstein suggests a parallel between Clerval’s discovery and his own creation of the Monster when he argues that colonialism is the work of ambitious men like him. Without ambition, he says, “America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed.” Frankenstein’s friendship with Clerval also shows the importance of companionship in the novel. Frankenstein draws strength and comfort from having a friend who shares his experiences and feelings: “Excellent friend! how sincerely you did love me, and endeavor to elevate my mind until it was on a level with your own!”

Themes

Dangerous Knowledge

The pursuit of knowledge is at the heart of *Frankenstein*, as Victor attempts to surge beyond accepted human limits and access the secret of life. Likewise, Robert Walton attempts to surpass previous human explorations by endeavoring to reach the North Pole. This ruthless pursuit of knowledge, of the light (see “Light and Fire”), proves dangerous, as Victor’s act of creation eventually results in the destruction of everyone dear to him, and Walton finds himself perilously trapped between sheets of ice. Whereas Victor’s obsessive hatred of the monster drives him to his death, Walton ultimately pulls back from his treacherous mission, having learned from Victor’s example how destructive the thirst for knowledge can be.

Sublime Nature

The sublime natural world, embraced by Romanticism (late eighteenth century to mid-nineteenth century) as a source of unrestrained emotional experience for the individual, initially offers characters the possibility of spiritual renewal. Mired in depression and remorse after the deaths of William and Justine, for which he feels responsible, Victor heads to the mountains to lift his spirits. Likewise, after a hellish winter of cold and abandonment, the monster feels his heart lighten as spring arrives. The influence of

nature on mood is evident throughout the novel, but for Victor, the natural world's power to console him wanes when he realizes that the monster will haunt him no matter where he goes. By the end, as Victor chases the monster obsessively, nature, in the form of the Arctic desert, functions simply as the symbolic backdrop for his primal struggle against the monster.

Monstrosity

Obviously, this theme pervades the entire novel, as the monster lies at the center of the action. Eight feet tall and hideously ugly, the monster is rejected by society. However, his monstrosity results not only from his grotesque appearance but also from the unnatural manner of his creation, which involves the secretive animation of a mix of stolen body parts and strange chemicals. He is a product not of collaborative scientific effort but of dark, supernatural workings. The monster is only the most literal of a number of monstrous entities in the novel, including the knowledge that Victor used to create the monster (see "Dangerous Knowledge"). One can argue that Victor himself is a kind of monster, as his ambition, secrecy, and selfishness alienate him from human society. Ordinary on the outside, he may be the true "monster" inside, as he is eventually consumed by an obsessive hatred of his creation. Finally, many critics have described the novel itself as monstrous, a stitched-together combination of different voices, texts, and tenses (see Texts).

Secrecy

Victor conceives of science as a mystery to be probed; its secrets, once discovered, must be jealously guarded. He considers M. Krempe, the natural philosopher he meets at Ingolstadt, a model scientist: “an uncouth man, but deeply imbued in the secrets of his science.” Victor’s entire obsession with creating life is shrouded in secrecy, and his obsession with destroying the monster remains equally secret until Walton hears his tale. Whereas Victor continues in his secrecy out of shame and guilt, the monster is forced into seclusion by his grotesque appearance. Walton serves as the final confessor for both, and their tragic relationship becomes immortalized in Walton’s letters. In confessing all just before he dies, Victor escapes the stifling secrecy that has ruined his life; likewise, the monster takes advantage of Walton’s presence to forge a human connection, hoping desperately that at last someone will understand, and empathize with, his miserable existence.

Texts

Frankenstein is overflowing with texts: letters, notes, journals, inscriptions, and books fill the novel, sometimes nestled inside each other, other times simply alluded to or quoted. Walton’s letters envelop the entire tale; Victor’s story fits inside Walton’s letters; the monster’s story fits inside Victor’s; and the love story of Felix and Safie and references to *Paradise Lost* fit inside the monster’s story. This profusion of texts is an important aspect of the narrative structure, as the various writings serve as concrete manifestations of characters’ attitudes and emotions. Language plays an enormous role in the monster’s development. By hearing and watching the peasants, the monster learns to speak and

read, which enables him to understand the manner of his creation, as described in Victor's journal. He later leaves notes for Victor along the chase into the northern ice, inscribing words in trees and on rocks, turning nature itself into a writing surface.

Family

Frankenstein presents family relationships as central to human life. Most of the families that appear in the novel—the Frankensteins and the DeLaceys—are perfect to the point of idealization. Meanwhile, most of the book's horror and suffering is caused by characters losing their connection to their families, or not having a family in the first place. Frankenstein blames his isolation from his family for his disastrous decision to create the Monster: "If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections [...] then that study is certainly unlawful." The Monster, too, blames his suffering on the fact that he has no family: "I was dependent on none and related to none." When the Monster is trying to persuade Frankenstein to create a companion for him, he argues that his lack of family relationships is what has caused him to become a murderer. On the other hand, the Monster does have a family, in that Frankenstein is his father. Before creating the Monster, Frankenstein imagines that "No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve" the Monster's. Instead, the Monster and Frankenstein spend the novel trying to destroy each other.

Alienation

Frankenstein suggests that social alienation is both the primary cause of evil and the punishment for it. The Monster explicitly says that his alienation from mankind has caused him to become a murderer: “My protectors had departed, and had broken the only link that held me to the world. For the first time the feelings of revenge and hatred filled my bosom.” His murders, however, only increase his alienation.

For Frankenstein, too, alienation causes him to make bad decisions and is also the punishment for those bad decisions. When Frankenstein creates the Monster, he is working alone, in a “solitary chamber, or rather cell.” Being “solitary” has caused his ambition to grow dangerously, but this isolation is already its own punishment: his laboratory feels like a “cell.” Once he has created the Monster, Frankenstein becomes even more alienated from the people around him because he can’t tell anyone about his creation.

Both Frankenstein and the Monster compare themselves to the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost*: alienation from God is both Satan’s crime and his punishment. The novel presents the idea that alienation from other people is caused, at root, by alienation from oneself. Frankenstein’s father points out the link between self-hatred and alienation: “I know that while you are pleased with yourself, you will think of us with affection, and we shall hear regularly from you.” As long as a person feels they have self-worth, they’ll maintain contact with others. The Monster feels that he is alienated from human society because he looks monstrous. He first recognizes that he is ugly not through someone else’s judgement but through his own: “when I viewed myself in a transparent pool [...] I was filled with the bitterest sensations.”

At the end of the novel, with Frankenstein dead, the Monster is alone in the world. His alienation is complete, and so is his self-hatred: "You hate me; but your abhorrence cannot equal that with which I regard myself." The ultimate consequence of alienation is self-destruction. Frankenstein drives himself to death chasing the Monster, while the Monster declares his intention to kill himself.

Ambition

Frankenstein suggests that ambition is dangerous because it has the potential to become evil. Frankenstein's ambition motivates him to create the Monster, and he compares his own ambition to a list of other destructive ambitions: "If no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved; Caesar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed." The fact that Frankenstein compares his own work to the destruction of entire civilizations underscores just how huge his ambition is. His suggestion that his ambition makes him like Satan, "the archangel who aspired to omnipotence," also points to the grandiosity of Frankenstein's ideas. Frankenstein imagines himself as nothing less than the devil incarnate. However, the novel also suggests that ambition alone is not enough to cause evil and suffering. Walton is introduced as a character every bit as ambitious as Frankenstein, but Walton chooses to abandon his ambition out of duty to his crew. Frankenstein's real mistake (and crime) is that he places his ambition above his responsibilities to other people.