

## Lecture 2: Frankenstein, or Modern Prometheus by Mary Shelley

### Warm-up

Watch this video and comment on the atmosphere and voice of the speaker:



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8Mm5ypkYf0>

What affects do you see in the illustration?

What do you think of the depiction of the monster?

In what terms would you describe the creature's physical appearance?

What do you think of Victor's mental condition when the creature wakes up?

What other aspects characterize the animation? What is the general mood of the animation?

- **Gothic literature** Gothic writing is a form of romantic literature that is characterized by pessimism, mystery, and macabre. While the term originally refers to a medieval Germanic tribe, it is often connected to everything that is archaic and old. In architecture it refers to "revival" of old styles that were trendy during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the gothic text, there are constant references to the old and archaic past. It emerged as a writing style in the mid-eighteenth century with the rise of the romantic belief that the Enlightenment was unable to reflect human complexity through rationalism. It was used by authors like S.T Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, and Byron to show how irrationality could criticize the rational experience because

feelings of fear and transgression affect humans more than optimistic situations (Smith 3).

The gothic text includes special settings, like castles, monasteries, and ruins. The characters are also peculiar too, they are often religious (nuns, monks), and aristocratic. They represent evil, terror, and are anti-enlightenment themes (Smith 4). Other aspects of the gothic text include grotesque and ugly figures, disgust, and the supernatural.

### **Mary Shelley's Novel and Gothicism**

The novel *Frankenstein, or Modern Prometheus* is a gothic Romantic novel. This genre covers narratives about strange and supernatural creatures, including pessimist stories of ghosts, beasts, ghoulish brides, and monsters. These narratives share the elements of fear, horror, and darkness, in addition to the reflection of the evil side of the human being and depictions of disgusting and grotesque figures and details.

As a gothic novel, *Frankenstein, Or Modern Prometheus* reflects the fears and warnings of the nineteenth century romantics to the advocates of rationality about the danger of glorifying science. Science was thought to be very powerful and to be able to replace God. The author acts upon her drives as a romantic writer and as an agent whose mission is to warn society, stages a conflict of man against God wherein the scientific experiment ends in a failure and agony as a punishment to the man who run the experiment. His punishment included total anxiety until his death (as a response from God for his defiance).

The novel was classified as a science-fiction novel because it includes a scientific experiment and traumatic results. Yet, the term science fiction (scientifiction) was only coined in 1920 while the novel was written in 1818. The novelist's tendency was romantic and may have common themes that merge with the modern age science fiction themes, like the defiance of God, the definition and power of science during the nineteenth century, and the fear of the future of humanity.

### **Themes and Atmosphere**

The novel explores themes of scientific discovery, creation, and the consequences of playing god. The protagonist faces different conflicts in this novel. The first is an ethical conflict towards Man and towards God. He attempts to play God by creating life and consequently his creation murders his relatives causing him to despair and anxiety. He feels a moral responsibility towards what may happen to other innocents as long as his creature was free in the wilderness. Other themes related to the **Promethan hero** figure of Victor are depicted in his anxiety, darkness, agony, fear, horror, and disgust.

### **Plot**

The novel is narrated in a series of letters told in the voice of Victor Frankenstein to Robert Walton. The narration begins in the ocean as Walton recounts the difficulties of traveling in the Arctic to his sister in a letter. The exposition in Robert's letter is crowned by his encounter with Victor. The conflict in Victor's story is marked by his curiosity towards the secret of life and death during his childhood. As a medical student he goes to Ingolstadt, and becomes obsessed with the idea of creating life to give more complexity to the conflict. His pursuit is met by his professors' warnings which he ignores and decides to read more about the secrets of animating an inanimate body, and run the experiment.

The events continue into a rising action when the creature wakes up and Victor realizes that it is a monster. He rejects the beast and shows anger and hostility to the creature who only demands company. Victor begins to work on a second experiment to fulfill the creature's request but it is restrained by moral implications. He aborts the experiment which triggers the monster's anger. This latter decides to take his revenge. The events continue to escalate as the monster starts murdering Victor's loved ones. The plot reaches its climax when Victor decides to pursue the beast to kill it. The two confront each other in a heated conversation in the Arctic, wherein the beast points Victor's self-centeredness and the extent to which it had hurt the creature and other people that surrounded him. Victor then succumbs to his illnesses in the harsh conditions of the Arctic and dies marking thus the end of the plot.

### **Characterization**

- **Victor Frankenstein:** He is the protagonist in the novel. He is an ambitious scientist who goes through different stages of maturity as a character. In the beginning he is depicted as a child who wants to be spoiled and who thinks that his mother and Elizabeth were his belongings. As a child his character reflects a certain sense of obsession which developed into the scientist who made the beast a few years later. As a medical student, he has a strong desire for knowledge and discovery.

Victor attempts to find the secret of life and through experimentation, which leads him to his creation, marking the beginning of the third stage in his character. In the third stage, Victor realizes that the failure of his experiment will have tremendous consequences on his surroundings. His rejection of the beast creates violence and throws him into deep agony. He is the **Promethean character** (as a reference to the title of the novel) because he lives and dies of agony for the well-being of humanity. He is compared to the Greek god Prometheus who lives in pain because he loves human beings. Just like Prometheus, Victor is thrown into agony when he realizes how dangerous his creature can be. These character alterations make him a round character.

- **The Creature (Frankenstein's Monster):** There is debate as to whether the monster is antagonist or not. The creature is a initially kind-hearted and seeks companionship, which he requests directly from Victor. yet after Victor aborts the second experiment, the monster starts hurting his surroundings intentionally and becomes a source of stress and agony to the protagonist. At this level, the monster is an antagonist.
- **Elizabeth Lavenza:** She is Victor's adopted sister and later his wife. She is one of the main characters. She represents beauty and care in the novel. She is murdered by the creature as part of his revenge.
- **Henry Clerval:** Main character, he is Victor's closest friend and is also murdered by the beast.
- **Robert Walton:** Main character, he is an arctic explorer who provides help to Victor then narrates his story in a letter he writes to his sister.
- **Justine Moritz:** A young girl that is adopted by Victor's parents. She is falsely accused of the killing of Victor's brother.

- **William Frankenstein:** He is Victor's younger brother. He was murdered by the beast and his death sets off a chain of tragic events in the novel.
- **De Lacey Family:** The monster observes them for a while to learn human habits and language. He learns kindness from them but they are scared of him when he reveals himself to them.

**Settings:** The settings of the text are selected purposefully to reflect event and emphasize its effect. The moment the creature wakes up is depicted as a rainy "dreary night of November". The description of the night includes darkness, coldness, and loneliness, which create a terrifying atmosphere for the plot.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

Childs Peter and Roger Fowler. *Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Routledge 2009.

Crimmins, Jonathan. "Mediation's Sleight of Hand: The Two Vectors of the Gothic in Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein.'" *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2013, pp. 561–83. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24247264>. Accessed 20 Jan. 2024.

Smith Andrew. *Gothic Literature*. Second ed. Edinburgh University Press 2013.

### Assignment

Read the excerpt below and write an essay where you analyze every aspect of the text.

**Mary Shelley (1797- 1851). *Frankenstein, or Modern Prometheus* (1818)**  
**Chapter 5: pp 55-56**

*"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, (**disgusting**) that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets **SIMILE** in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips; (**grotesque is an ugly creature**)*

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 **PERSONIFICATION**, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. *Analogy*

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. At length lassitude succeeded to the tumult I had before endured, and I threw myself on the bed in my clothes, endeavouring to seek a few moments of forgetfulness. But it was in vain; I slept, indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams **PERSONIFICATION**. I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health **(METAPHOR)**, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death **METAPHOR**; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the graveworms crawling in the folds of the flannel. *(Disgust, horror, fear)* 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 downstairs. I took refuge in the courtyard 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.

“Oh! No mortal could support the horror of that countenance (physical appearance). A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then, but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived.

“I passed the night wretchedly. Sometimes my pulse beat so quickly and hardly that I felt the palpitation of every artery; at others, I nearly sank to the ground through languor and extreme weakness. Mingled with this horror, I felt the bitterness of disappointment; dreams that had been my food and pleasant rest *(metaphor)* for so long a space were now become a hell to me *(analogy)* ; and the change was so rapid, the overthrow so complete!”

Find the complete analysis here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8I4squoFoVA&t=9s>

