

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851)



English Romantic novelist, biographer and editor, best known as the writer of *FRANKENSTEIN, OR, THE MODERN PROMETHEUS* (1818). Shelley was 21 when the book was published; she started to write it when she was 18. The story deals with an ambitious young scientist. He creates life but then rejects his creation, a monster.

"But success shall crown my endeavours. Wherefore not? Thus far I have gone, tracking a secure way over the pathless seas: the very stars themselves being witnesses and testimonies of my triumph. Why not still proceed over the untamed yet obedient element? What can stop the determined heart and resolved will of man?" (from *Frankenstein*)

Mary Shelley was born in London. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, died 10 days after giving birth to her. She was one of the first feminists, the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Her father was the writer and political journalist William Godwin, who became famous with his work *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793). Godwin had revolutionary attitudes to most social institutions, including marriage.

In her childhood Mary Shelley was left to educate herself amongst her father's intellectual circle of friends. Percy Bysshe Shelley came into Godwin's circle in 1812. Mary published her first poem at the age of ten. At the age of 16 she ran away to France and Switzerland with Shelley. They married in 1816 after Shelley's first wife had committed suicide by drowning. Their first child, a daughter, died in Venice, Italy, a few years later. In *HISTORY OF SIX WEEKS TOUR* (1817) the Shelleys jointly recorded their life. They then returned to England and Mary gave birth to a son, William.

The story of *Frankenstein* started in the summer of 1816 near Geneva in Switzerland. Mary took a challenge set by Byron and Shelley to write the most frightening ghost story. With her husband's encouragement, she completed the novel within a year. She had listened to her husband and Byron discuss galvanism (revival of the dead). At Eton College Shelley had become interested in Luigi Galvani's experiments with electric shocks to make dead frogs' muscles twitch. It is possible that his teacher, James Lind had demonstrated the technique to Shelley. In her Introduction to the 1831 edition Mary revealed that she got the story from a dream, in which she saw **"the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with a uneasy, half vital motion."**

When the book was published in 1818, it became a huge success. In 1818 the Shelleys left England for Italy, where they remained until Shelley's death - he drowned in 1822. In 1819 Mary suffered a nervous breakdown after the death of William who died of malaria at the age of 3 - she had also lost a daughter the previous year. In 1822 she had a dangerous miscarriage and she believed that she would die. Shelley wrote to her friend Maria Gisborne about this loss and her husband's death, concluding the letter: "**Well here is my story - the last story I shall have to tell - all that might have been bright in my life is now despoiled - I shall live to improve myself, to take care of my child, & render myself worthy to join him. soon my weary pilgrimage will begin - I rest now - but soon I must leave Italy -**". Of their children only one, Percy Florence, survived infancy. In 1823 she returned with her son to England, determined not to re-marry. She devoted herself to his welfare and education and continued her career as a professional writer. She did, however, have a few more romantic attachments.

None of Shelley's later works matched the power of her first legendary novel. She wrote several romances. *THE LAST MAN* (1826) depicts the end of human civilization, set in the 21st century republican England. Its second part describes the gradual destruction of the human race by plague. The story is narrated by Lionel Verney, the last man of the title, living amidst the ruins of Rome. Feminist critics have paid attention to its fantasy of the total corrosion of patriarchal order.

Shelley gave up writing long fiction when realism started to gain popularity, exemplified in the works of Charles Dickens. She wrote numerous short stories and some travelogues. The story of Frankenstein's monster has inspired over 50 films.



*The subtitle *The Modern Prometheus* refers to the figure in Greek mythology who was responsible for a conflict between mankind and the gods. In order to help the people, Prometheus stole Zeus's fire from the sun. The people were thereby given an advantage to the animals since fire gave man the ability to make weapons and tools. Prometheus was severely punished by Zeus who chained him to a rock in the Caucasus. Every night, Prometheus was visited by an eagle who ate from his liver. During the day, however, his liver grew back to its original state.*

It also refers to the story of Prometheus plasticator who was to said to have created and animated mankind out of clay. These two myths were eventually fused together: the fire that Prometheus had stolen is the fire of life with which he animated his clay models.

Because of the 'creating' aspect, Prometheus became a symbol for the creating artist in the eighteenth century. Victor Frankenstein can indeed be seen as the modern Prometheus. He defies the gods by creating life himself. Instead of being the created, Victor takes God's place and becomes the creator. Just as Prometheus, Victor gets punished for his deeds. He is, however, punished by his creation whereas Prometheus was punished by the god he stole from.