

The idea for Frankenstein developed when Lord Byron, Shelley, Mary and Polidori came together in the summer of 1816 in Switzerland. On a fateful day, they were confined indoors due to rain. Byron came up with the idea that each of them should write a ghost story to pass the time.

Byron's tale was included in a fragment at the end of his poem "Of Mateppa." Shelley based his story on the early experiences of his life, while Polidori's story was flimsy. Mary Shelley alone succeeded in creating a story that could "awaken thrilling horror."

She had learned about various philosophical and scientific doctrines. Galvanism (the re-animating of a corpse) was a popular topic of discussion at that time. In the preface to Frankenstein, Mary Shelley states that the book was conceived in a dream in which she saw a "pale student of unhallowed arts putting together the hideous phantasm of a man." She writes, "the idea so possessed my mind that a thrill of fear ran through me, and I wished to exchange the ghastly image of my fancy for the 'realities around'." She realized that what terrified her would also terrify others, and so she formulated her story.

Frankenstein is also in keeping with the spirit of the times. The novel reflects many elements of the Romantic period (1798-1832): the primacy of feeling, the importance of nature, the individual and his quest, the supernatural and the exotic, and solitude.

Summary

Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus is the most famous novel by Mary Shelley, wife of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. It has done considerable damage thanks to its innovation and its author's audacity in confronting issues of such a controversial nature as artificially creating life in the early nineteenth century. The novel was immediately enormously successful, spawning a stage production that made Frankenstein's creation - the so-called 'monster' - mute for the first but not only time. The novel was published initially in 1818 although later versions exist in which the author succumbed to pressures to tone down certain elements. This is the more polished 1831 edition, which is the most common edition of the text. The original is a masterpiece of Gothic literature however. It is narrated by an explorer, Walton, who writes the story in letters home. However, the bulk of the story is told by Victor Frankenstein who narrates his own creation of a man from bones he has stolen and with the power of electricity. In the centre of the concentric circles of narrative is the creature himself, by far the most sympathetic of the narrators, who is forced by an unsympathetic world to acts of violence and cruelty and finally the murder of Frankenstein's wife when the 'father' refuses to create a companion for the creature. The novel's settings of Swiss mountains and Arctic desolation are perfect for Mary Shelley's tale that was originally conceived abroad in the wet summer of 1816 with Byron and her husband in a night telling ghost stories. None of the narrators are wholly to be trusted or liked, but each learns from the others and their mental torment is mimicked in the 'sublime' or rugged and vast landscapes Shelley describes so vividly. Film adaptations and bowdlerized versions have reduced Frankenstein's creation to a ludicrous monster and in a sense the world has reacted to the creature in precisely the way the author predicted. We look away in horror

FRANKENSTEIN; OR, THE MODERN PROMETHEUS (1818) The novel starts with a series of letters from Robert Walton to his sister. Walton is an English Arctic explorer who spots a strange creature on a dog-sled. The exhausted Victor Frankenstein arrives, in pursuit of the creature, and while recuperating tells his story. He has been born into a wealthy Geneva family. After his mother dies of scarlet fever and becomes a student of natural philosophy and medicine. Inspired by occult philosophy and the teaching of his mentor, Waldman, he builds a creature in the semblance of a man and gives it life. Its body is assembled from parts which Frankenstein has stolen from butcher shops, dissecting rooms, and charnel-houses. The creature is repeatedly rejected by those who see it, but the monster proves intelligent, and later highly articulate. Receiving no love, it becomes embittered. Frankenstein deserts his creation, who disappears. **"I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I have deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I have finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart."** (from *Frankenstein*) Frankenstein hears that his younger brother has been strangled, but Justine, his family's servant confesses the murder. However, later the monster tells that he murdered William and framed Justine. Frankenstein then agrees to make a mate for the monster so that it will not bother anyone again. A wave of remorse makes him destroy the female. The lone creature swears revenge. He kills Frankenstein's bride, Elizabeth, on their wedding night. The scientist becomes mad, but recovers and chases the creature across the world. The two confront in the Arctic wastes. Frankenstein dies. The creature describes eloquently to Walton his efforts to seek out beauty and how crime has degraded it beneath the meanest animal. **"He is dead who called me into being; and when I shall be no more the very remembrance of us both will speedily vanish. I shall no longer see the sun or stars, or feel the wind play on my cheeks. Light, feeling, and sense will pass away; and in this condition must I find my happiness."** The monster leaps from the ship on a ice-raft, disappearing again in the darkness. - The novel contains no supernatural elements; the creation of the monster is described in the third edition on a rational scientific basis. Frankenstein is a scientist who challenges the Creator of the world with the possibilities of modern science, but is destroyed by his own ethical irresponsibility.

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Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus contains elements of two major genres of literature: the gothic and science fiction.

Gothicism is part of the Romantic Movement that started in the late eighteenth century and lasted to roughly three decades into the nineteenth century. The Romantic Movement is characterised by innovation (instead of traditionalism), spontaneity (according to Wordsworth good poetry is a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" 1), freedom of thought and expression (especially the thoughts and feelings of the poet himself), an idealisation of nature (Romantic poets were also referred to as "nature poets") and the belief of living in an age of "new beginnings and high possibilities." 2.

The first novel that was later identified as Gothic was Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* in 1764. *The Castle of Otranto*, like many other Gothic novels, is set in a medieval society, has a lot of mysterious disappearances as well as other supernatural occurrences. The

main protagonist is usually a solitary character who has an egocentric nature. Even though the genre is a phase in the Romantic movement, it is regarded as the forerunner of the modern mystery or science fiction novel.

Many of the above mentioned elements appear in *Frankenstein*. For example, nature is used frequently to create atmosphere. The bleak, glacial fields of the Alps and the mists of the Arctic serve to indicate the isolation of the two protagonists. The solitary character in *Frankenstein* can apply to both Victor as his creation as they both live their lives in social isolation.

Although Gothic novels were written mainly to evoke terror in their readers, they also served to show the dark side of human nature. They describe the "nightmarish terrors that lie beneath the controlled and ordered surface of the conscious mind." 3 Surprisingly, there were a vast number of female Gothic authors. It is not unlikely that this kind of fiction provided a release for the "submerged desires of that . . . disadvantaged class." 4

The Gothic genre also extends to poetry. Poems by Coleridge and Keats ("Christabel" and "Eve of St. Agnes" respectively) deal with "the fantastic . . . and the exploration of the unconscious mind". 5

Science fiction explores "the marvels of discovery and achievement that may result from future developments in science and technology". 6 Mary Shelley used some of the most recent technological findings of her time to create *Frankenstein*. She has replaced the heavenly fire of the Prometheus myth with the spark of newly discovered electricity. The concepts of electricity and warmth led to the discovery of the galvanisation process, which was said to be the key to the animation of life. Indeed, it is this process which animates Frankenstein's monster.