

## FRANKENSTEIN; OR, THE MODERN PROMETHEUS (1818)

*Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* was immediately enormously successful. There was soon 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. The original is a masterpiece of Gothic literature. The narrator is an explorer, Walton, who writes of his experiences in letters home. However, most of the story is told within this framework by Victor Frankenstein. In the centre of the 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. 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 have reduced Frankenstein's creation to a ludicrous monster, producing precisely the reaction the author predicted: we look away in horror. Frankenstein is in keeping with the spirit of the time. The novel reflects many elements of the Romantic period: the primacy of feeling, the importance of nature, the individual and his quest, the exotic, and solitude.

### SUMMARY

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 he 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."**

Frankenstein hears that his younger brother, William, has been strangled, but Justine, his family's servant confesses to the murder. However, later the monster says 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 does not contain supernatural elements. 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.

*Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* contains elements of two major genre 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" 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."

Even though the Gothic 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 and 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." 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."

The Gothic genre also extends to poetry. Poems by Coleridge and Keats also deal with "the fantastic . . . and the exploration of the unconscious mind"

Science fiction explores "the marvels of discovery and achievement that may result from future developments in science and technology". 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.

In her novel *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley does not clearly comment on her position. Is she condemning the protagonist Victor Frankenstein or is she approving of his deeds? For years literary critics have been discussing this question without finding a clear answer. Frankenstein's original reasons for creating life from dead parts are noble. He wants to help mankind conquer death and diseases. But when he reaches the goal of his efforts and sees his creature and its ugliness, he turns away from it and flees the monstrosity he has created. From that moment on he tries to suppress the consequences of his experiments and wants to escape them by working in other sciences. Victor even withdraws from his friends and changes psychologically. Mary Shelley seems not to condemn the act of creation but rather Frankenstein's lack of willingness to accept the responsibility for his deeds. His creation only becomes a monster at the moment his creator deserts it. *Frankenstein* warns of the careless use of science, which is still an important issue, centuries after the book was written.

In his corrupting striving for knowledge Frankenstein is compared to Prometheus, as the novel's subtitle "The Modern Prometheus" suggests. The mythological Prometheus rebelled against a divine authority just as Frankenstein was a rebel against nature when he tried not only to find the secret of life but also to remove life's defects. In Victor both aspects of the Prometheus myth are embodied: the transgressive and the creative. *Frankenstein* is truly a drama of the Romantic Promethean hero who fails in his attempt to help mankind.

