

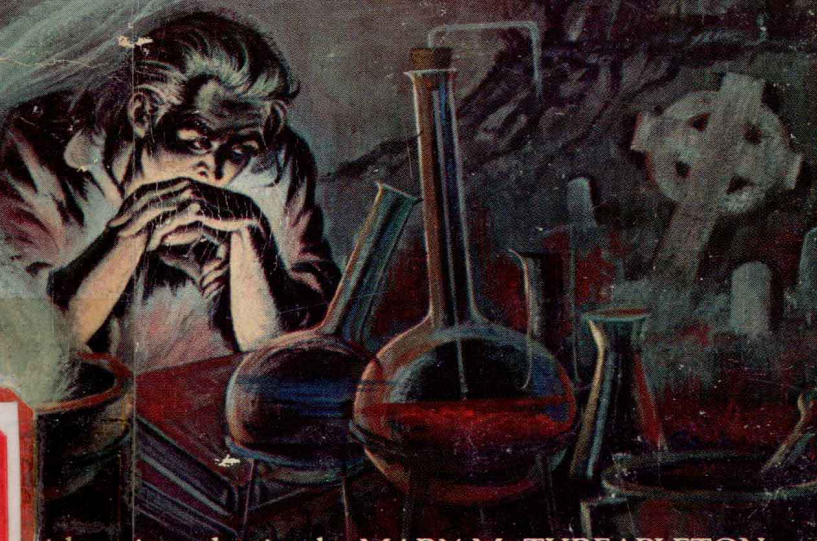


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CLASSICS SERIES CL19

MARY SHELLEY Frankenstein

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED



With an introduction by MARY M. THREAPLETON

Frankenstein

.....
[or, The Modern Prometheus]

MARY SHELLEY



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Frankenstein



MARY SHELLEY

Introduction

Many readers, familiar with the Hollywood movies of *Frankenstein*, and opening the book for the first time, may be surprised not to find themselves transported at once to a remote castle, complete with galvanic flashes and the inarticulate grunts of Boris Karloff. Instead, they are bound for the North Pole with an ardent explorer, Robert Walton. *Frankenstein* is a frame story; that is, a story within a story. The frame is provided by Walton's letters to his sister, describing his journey and the strange incident that befalls him on the icy waters. He and his crew see a sledge, driven by a gigantic figure, and later rescue from an ice raft a man in pitiful condition. This man is Frankenstein, who tells his story to Walton. At the end of the book, we return to the frame, where Walton writes of Frankenstein's death and the failure of the expedition. The frame is perhaps too long and involved for artistic balance; Mary Shelley had intended originally to write a short story, but was encouraged by her husband to expand it into a novel. But the frame does make definite contributions. One of these is a degree of credibility. Many authors of fantastic tales have used the device for this reason; for example, we find a frame in Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, and in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. Only Frankenstein can tell his own story, but it

gains in credibility by being reported to us by a man who believes it, and has actually seen some evidence of its truth. Moreover, a kind of universality is contributed by the frame, since Walton, like Frankenstein, desires to achieve something beyond the powers of ordinary man. It is because of this desire that Frankenstein tells Walton his story, as a warning of the disasters that await those who have such dreams. The book's subtitle, "A Modern Prometheus," makes the same point. Prometheus disobeyed the gods and gave divine fire to man; for his presumption he was chained to a crag to suffer agonizing punishment.

The inner story contains a lengthy autobiography, complete with dialogue and scenery, but the central idea is the one visualized by Mary Shelley that night in Switzerland:

"When I placed my head on my pillow I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, sifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bound of reverie . . . I saw the pale student of the unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I 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 an uneasy, half-vital motion."

In the course of the story, Frankenstein is horribly punished for thus presuming to overstep man's proper bounds. His brother, his best friend, and his bride all fall victim to the monster he has created. He is punished not only because he has dared to create it, but also because he fails to assume due responsibility for it. He gave the monster life, but he was too horrified to guide it, to make it into a power for good.

That the monster is capable of good is made clear by its own story. It yearns for music, for learning, for virtue, for human companionship. But the only human beings with whom it seeks contact are repelled by its hideous appearance, and it is forced to lead the life of a wild animal.

It turns on Frankenstein in revenge for its creation and rejection, and wreaks destruction on his family. When the unhappy scientist refuses to complete the creation of a mate for the monster, the baffled creature, now a force for evil, continues its vendetta. After the murder of Frankenstein's bride, it leads its creator on a chase across the world. It is toward the end of this chase that the frame picks up the story. This treatment of the theme of rejection reflects the humanitarianism of Mary Shelley's father's philosophy. Although Frankenstein himself refuses to grant the justice of the monster's grievance, there is considerable sympathy aroused for it in the reader, despite the very proper horror associated with the murders.

Frankenstein is part of the "Gothic novel" tradition popular in England at the close of the eighteenth century. But this novel, published in 1818, represents something new in the field. Although it has some of the standard features of the tale of horror, it is superior to most of them in that it contains an idea, not merely gratuitous horrors. It is also the forerunner of modern science-fiction novels, many of which contain the same theme of disaster arising from man's overreaching himself in science. The theme of rejection by society of a man who then turns on society is of course a common one in twentieth century fiction. The appeal of the idea of a man's creating monstrous life is vouched for by the many "horror movies" on this theme.

This is not to say that the book has no faults. The overly long and elaborated frame has already been mentioned. There are, also, unsatisfying improbabilities in the plot. Although a foundation is laid for the monster's literacy, the reader is still surprised to find it reading Plutarch, Goethe, and Milton. And surely it is unreasonable for a man who has been warned that the monster will be with him on his wedding night to spend his honeymoon in an isolated spot, and then to leave his bride unguarded, even for a moment! Also, much of the style and dialogue seem artificial to the modern reader. But the fact remains that *Frankenstein* is the only Gothic novel that still has a steady reading audience, and the hero's name is a household word to millions.

In August of 1797, a daughter, Mary, was born to William Godwin, the outstanding political philosopher of his day, and his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, well known in her own right as a champion of the feminist cause. Unhappily, the mother died only a few weeks later. Godwin remarried in 1801, and the childhood of Mary and her older sister Fanny was made miserable by their strong-willed stepmother and her noisy and capricious children. Mary, quiet and shy, suffered particularly from the daily battles and upheavals in the household, and developed into a withdrawn, solitary child. Eventually her health began to decline, and she was sent to stay with a family in Scotland, where she lived happily until she was nearly seventeen, when her father ordered her home. Partly because of an ill-advised publishing venture, the Godwin finances were far from stable, and Godwin was depending heavily for fund-raising on the young poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley. Shelley had sought his acquaintanceship out of admiration for his book, *An Enquiry into Political Justice*.

Although he was already married, Shelley and Mary fell deeply in love, and despite the disapproval of her parents and the grief of his young wife, they ran away to France, taking with them Mary's stepsister, Jane Clairmont, who had aided them in their secret meetings. There were idyllic periods in the years that followed, but Mary's life with Shelley was not always easy or happy. Their first three children died when they were very young; Jane, now known as Claire, made an often troublesome third in their household; they were almost always in debt; William Godwin's financial demands were unceasing; and they lived under a cloud of ugly scandal. They were constantly on the move, in England and on the continent. It was in Switzerland, during an evening at Byron's villa, that *Frankenstein* had its beginnings. The group had been reading aloud from a collection of German ghost stories, and it was decided that each should write a tale of terror. Shelley's and Byron's came to nothing, but Mary, brooding later over another conversation about the principle of life, was seized with the idea of a man actually creating life in the laboratory, only to be horrified by his

success. In her own words, "Swift as light and as cheering was the idea that broke upon me. 'I have found it! What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow.' On the morrow I announced that I had thought of a story." Encouraged by Shelley, she set to work on the macabre tale, a remarkable achievement for a girl of nineteen.

Shelley married Mary in 1816, after the death of his first wife. Their fourth child, Percy, was sturdy and cheerful, but other troubles made Mary subject to fits of melancholy and her health deteriorated. Then tragedy struck again—Shelley was drowned. Shattered with grief and worried about money, Mary returned to England in 1823 to find herself a celebrity. Her second novel, *Valperga*, was selling well and *Frankenstein* had been dramatized successfully. She settled down to writing to support herself and her son, since her father was a heavy drain on her resources, and her father-in-law, Sir Timothy Shelley, refused to give her an adequate allowance. Her next novel, *The Last Man*, appeared in 1826, and by the 1830's, Mary had made a full and interesting life for herself, shadowed only by her continuing grief for Shelley. *Lodora*, an autobiographical novel, was published in 1835. In 1844, Sir Timothy died, and Percy came into the title and the inheritance. When he married, Mary was able to turn over the tedious task of household management to her able daughter-in-law, who protected her from demands and interruptions, including those of Claire. Thus Mary lived peacefully with her memories of Shelley until her death in 1851.

MARY M. THREAPLETON

To
William Godwin
Author of Political Justice, Caleb Williams, etc.
These volumes
Are respectfully inscribed
by
The Author

*Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
to mould me man? Did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?—*

PARADISE LOST

PREFACE

THE event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed, by Dr. Darwin, and some of the physiological writers of Germany, as not of impossible occurrence. I shall not be supposed as according the remotest degree of serious faith to such an imagination; yet, in assuming it as the basis of a work of fancy, I have not considered myself as merely weaving a series of supernatural terrors. The event on which the interest of the story depends is exempt from the disadvantages of a mere tale of spectres or enchantment. It was recommended by the novelty of the situations which it developes; and, however impossible as a physical fact, affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield.

I have thus endeavoured to preserve the truth of the elementary principles of human nature, while I have not scrupled to innovate upon their combinations. The *Iliad*, the tragic poetry of Greece—Shakespeare, in the *Tempest* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*—and most especially Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, conform to this rule; and the most humble novelist, who seeks to confer or receive amusement from his labours, may, without presumption, apply to prose fiction a license, or rather a rule, from the adoption of which so many exquisite combinations of human feeling have resulted in the highest specimens of poetry.

The circumstance on which my story rests was suggested in casual conversation. It was commenced partly as a source of amusement, and partly as an expedient for exercising any untried resources of mind. Other mo-

tives were mingled with these as the work proceeded. I am by no means indifferent to the manner in which whatever moral tendencies exist in the sentiments or characters it contains shall affect the reader; yet my chief concern in this respect has been limited to the avoiding the enervating effects of the novels of the present day and to the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue. The opinions which naturally spring from the character and situation of the hero are by no means to be conceived as existing always in my own conviction; nor is any inference justly to be drawn from the following pages as prejudicing any philosophical doctrine of whatever kind.

It is a subject also of additional interest to the author that this story was begun in the majestic region where the scene is principally laid, and in society which cannot cease to be regretted. I passed the summer of 1816 in the environs of Geneva. The season was cold and rainy, and in the evenings we crowded around a blazing wood fire, and occasionally amused ourselves with some German stories of ghosts, which happened to fall into our hands. These tales excited in us a playful desire of imitation. Two other friends (a tale from the pen of one of whom would be far more acceptable to the public than anything I can ever hope to produce) and myself agreed to write each a story founded on some supernatural occurrence.

The weather, however, suddenly became serene; and my two friends left me on a journey among the Alps. and lost, in the magnificent scenes which they present, all memory of their ghostly visions. The following tale is the only one which has been completed.

MARLOW, SEPTEMBER 1817.

INTRODUCTION

(to the 1831 edition)

THE Publishers of the Standard Novels,¹ in selecting 'Frankenstein' for one of their series, expressed a wish that I should furnish them with some account of the origin of the story. I am the more willing to comply, because I shall thus give a general answer to the question, so very frequently asked me—'How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea?' It is true that I am very averse to bringing myself forward in print; but as my account will only appear as an appendage to a former production, and as it will be confined to such topics as have connection with my authorship alone, I can scarcely accuse myself of a personal intrusion.

It is not singular that, as the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity, I should very early in life have thought of writing. As a child I scribbled; and my favourite pastime, during the hours given me for recreation, was to 'write stories.' Still I had a dearer pleasure than this, which was the formation of castles in the air—the indulging in waking dreams—the following up trains of thought, which had for their subject the formation of a succession of imaginary incidents. My dreams were at once more fantastic and agreeable than my writings. In the latter I was a close imitator—rather doing as others had done, than putting down the suggestions of my own mind. What I wrote was intended at least for one other eye—my childhood's companion and friend; but my

¹ Messrs Colburn & Bentley, 1831.

dreams were all my own; I accounted for them to nobody; they were my refuge when annoyed—my dearest pleasure when free.

I lived principally in the country as a girl, and passed a considerable time in Scotland. I made occasional visits to the more picturesque parts; but my habitual residence was on the blank and dreary northern shores of the Tay, near Dundee. Blank and dreary on retrospection I call them; they were not so to me then. They were the eyry of freedom, and the pleasant region where unheeded I could commune with the creatures of my fancy. I wrote then—but in a most common-place style. It was beneath the trees of the grounds belonging to our house, or on the bleak sides of the woodless mountains near, that my true compositions, the airy flights of my imagination, were born and fostered. I did not make myself the heroine of my tales. Life appeared to me too common-place an affair as regarded myself. I could not figure to myself that romantic woes or wonderful events would ever be my lot; but I was not confined to my own identity, and I could people the hours with creations far more interesting to me at that age, than my own sensations.

After this my life became busier, and reality stood in place of fiction. My husband, however, was from the first, very anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage, and enrol myself on the page of fame. He was for ever inciting me to obtain literary reputation, which even on my own part I cared for then, though since I have become infinitely indifferent to it. At this time he desired that I should write, not so much with the idea that I could produce any thing worthy of notice, but that he might himself judge how far I possessed the promise of better things hereafter. Still I did nothing. Travelling, and the cares of a family, occupied my time; and study, in the way of reading, or improving my ideas in communication with his far more cultivated mind, was all of literary employment that engaged my attention.

In the summer of 1816, we visited Switzerland, and became the neighbours of Lord Byron. At first we spent our pleasant hours on the lake, or wandering on its shores;

and Lord Byron, who was writing the third canto of *Childe Harold*, was the only one among us who put his thoughts upon paper. These, as he brought them successively to us, clothed in all the light and harmony of poetry, seemed to stamp as divine the glories of heaven and earth, whose influences we partook with him.

But it proved a wet, ungenial summer, and incessant rain often confined us for days to the house. Some volumes of ghost stories, translated from the German into French, fell into our hands. There was the *History of the Inconstant Lover*, who, when he thought to clasp the bride to whom he had pledged his vows, found himself in the arms of the pale ghost of her whom he had deserted. There was the tale of the sinful founder of his race, whose miserable doom it was to bestow the kiss of death on all the younger sons of his fated house, just when they reached the age of promise. His gigantic, shadowy form, clothed like the ghost in *Hamlet*, in complete armour, but with the beaver up, was seen at midnight, by the moon's fitful beams, to advance slowly along the gloomy avenue. The shape was lost beneath the shadow of the castle walls; but soon a gate swung back, a step was heard, the door of the chamber opened, and he advanced to the couch of the blooming youths, cradled in healthy sleep. Eternal sorrow sat upon his face as he bent down and kissed the forehead of the boys, who from that hour withered like flowers snapt upon the stalk. I have not seen these stories since then; but their incidents are as fresh in my mind as if I had read them yesterday.

'We will each write a ghost story,' said Lord Byron; and his proposition was acceded to. There were four of us. The noble author began a tale, a fragment of which he printed at the end of his poem of *Mazeppa*. Shelley, more apt to embody ideas and sentiments in the radiance of brilliant imagery, and in the music of the most melodious verse that adorns our language, than to invent the machinery of a story, commenced one founded on the experiences of his early life. Poor Polidori had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady, who was so pun-

ished for peeping through a keyhole—what to see I forget—something very shocking and wrong of course; but when she was reduced to a worse condition than the renowned Tom of Coventry, he did not know what to do with her, and was obliged to despatch her to the tomb of the Capulets, the only place for which she was fitted. The illustrious poets also, annoyed by the platitude of prose, speedily relinquished their uncongenial task.

I busied myself *to think of a story*—a story to rival those which had excited us to this task. One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror—one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart. If I did not accomplish these things, my ghost story would be unworthy of its name. I thought and pondered—vainly. I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations. *Have you thought of a story?* I was asked each morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative.

Everything must have a beginning, to speak in Sanchean phrase; and that beginning must be linked to something that went before. The Hindoos give the world an elephant to support it, but they make the elephant stand upon a tortoise. Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself. In all matters of discovery and invention, even of those that appertain to the imagination, we are continually reminded of the story of Columbus and his egg. Invention consists in the capacity of seizing on the capabilities of a subject, and in the power of moulding and fashioning ideas suggested to it.

Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these, various philosophical doctrines were discussed, and among others the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any prob-