

# Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the first Science Fiction Critique of Science

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# Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851)

- Mary Wollstonecraft died 11 days after bearing Mary. Revolutionary.
- Father, William Godwin, a philosopher: Humans are naturally benevolent and become evil when abused by society; *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Political Justice*
- Heard Coleridge read “Ancient Mariner”— Danger of Offending Nature
- Married Percy Shelley in 1814
- Wrote *Frankenstein* in 1816 at age of 19; Byron’s Lake Geneva home and ghost stories.
- Galvani’s frog legs



# Personal Experience of Death: Biographical Criticism

- Mother dying when Mary was a baby
- In Feb. 1815, her own first child who was premature, died a few days after birth: in her Journal she wrote, “Dream that my little baby came to life again; that it has only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived.”

# Is this sort of Fiction Possible? Would it be Ethical?

- Brain transplants:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/1263758.stm>

- Stem Cells: Is a fertilized egg in the early stages of gestation a “creature” endowed with rights?

[http://web.sfn.org/content/Publications/Brain  
Briefings/brain injury trauma.htm](http://web.sfn.org/content/Publications/BrainBriefings/brain_injury_trauma.htm)

# *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*

- Prometheus: benefactor of Mankind in Greek myth. Gave fire and technology to man. Father of civilization.
- Dr. Frankenstein as the maker of “Frankenstein” is a Modern Prometheus.
- He uses Science to probe the depths of nature and to steal the secret of life, just as Prometheus stole Fire from Zeus.
- Both Prometheus and Dr. Frankenstein are tragic victims on account of their “thefts” on behalf of civilization
- However, Prometheus is a martyr and Dr. Frankenstein is shown to be culpable.

# Why is Walton, the Explorer, the Focalizer?

- Walton is seeking the North West passage; pursuit of glory;
- Epistolary Form, like Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* (1748); Corresponds in letters with his sister; female characters live vicariously through brothers and husbands
- Likens himself to Coleridge's Mariner: he is a romantic (p. 7): passion and love of the marvelous; "What can stop the determined heart and will of man." (8)
- Dr. Frankenstein is the "Ancient Mariner" to Walton: "Do you share my madness?" Let me tell you my story...

# Mary's Critique of Male Hierarchical

- Attempt to dominate Nature is a failure; Man as Creator does not contemplate all the consequences of his power
- To create new life is to attempt to usurp the female power of procreation: it is a patriarchal enterprise.
- The scientific pursuit is one of glory: “what glory could attend if I could banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death.” (26) The Scientific and Medical project is fundamentally contrary to Nature (cyclical from life to death); it seeks the conquest of Death itself.
- The scientific pursuit is Godlike: to understand and manipulate the forces of Nature makes Man into a God.
- He can create life, but he cannot nurture it. He is neither a good God nor a good parent. Dr. Frankenstein abhors his own creation. Ironically, had he nurtured it as a woman might, the creature might not have become a monster.

# Sacrifice of Family and Friends at the altar of Knowledge

- Walton speaks of his desire for a friend: "I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me, whose eyes would reply to mine. You may deem me romantic, my dear sister, but I bitterly feel the want of a friend."
- Frankenstein neglects his family and friends while pursuing his studies. "I shunned my fellow creatures as if I had been guilty of a crime." His isolation will parallel the isolation and guilt of the monster-creature.
- His creature ultimately will destroy most of his family and his friends.

# The Creature and Milton's Adam and Eve

- "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs.
- He abandons the Creature: Is this the Romantic notion that God either had abandoned Man or that Man is Alone?
- Meeting Of Creature and Frankenstein: You have a duty to me! Covenant: Frankenstein will make him a partner as God made Adam Eve.

# Education and Civilization

- The creature was born good and virtuous, but people treated him so badly that he became wicked. "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend." Similar to Godwin's theory.
- Observation of Family in cabin: learns by imitation
- Hears a history book read and learns about civilization. Reads *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch's *Lives*, and Goethe's *Sorrows of Werther*.
- "Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but...He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous...allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature, but I was wretched, helpless, and alone."

# Self-Recognition and Despair: A Monster with Depth

- He recognizes his physical self in a mirror
- He recognizes his condition in the books that he reads and in comparing his situation to that of “his family” in the cabin.
- Despair at his condition will lead him to seek revenge from an uncaring creator.
- He has a psychological depth that is unlike the typical monster, Grendel, for example.

# God's Covenant

- When the creature and Frankenstein meet, he asks for a partner.
- Parallels the notion of Covenant: both Creator and Creature have mutual obligations. Even the creator must treat the creature, not as a means to some private end, but as an end in himself.
- Frankenstein comes to recognize this obligation; but, later he will renege and destroy the female creature.
- Man can not handle the ethical dilemmas involved in being Godlike.

# Hegel's Dialectic of Master and Servant

- The relationship between the creature and Frankenstein changes after the covenant: Frankenstein has become the Servant and the creature is the Master.
- "Begone! I do break my promise; never will I create another like yourself, equal in deformity and wickedness."
- "Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master; obey!" (146)
- A dread companionship develops after the death of Clerval and Elizabeth as these two have no one but each other; they are united in their mutual hatred.

# Conclusion

- Moral Lesson, warning of the failure of Science and Western Civilization, as a male, hierarchical, glory seeking, objectifying approach to the world.
- The optimism of Science is romantic, like the optimism of Walton, the explorer. Just as Walton is doomed not to find the North West Passage, so is Frankenstein doomed to fail as a Creator. Both attempt to control Nature (the power of life and death) and the physical power of Nature (Ice and Snow of Arctic).
- Ironically, friendship is what both men, and even the creature, crave. Friendship and Love, not glory, power, or knowledge, are the proper pursuits of man.

# Questions to Contemplate

- What are the proper and ethical limits of Science and the Pursuit of Knowledge and Control of Nature? How do we decide?
- Is *Frankenstein* a Romantic Novel? Why or why not?
- Is Shelley's "Monster" a sympathetic character? Why or why not?
- Do you agree that the "creature" becomes master of the creator as the novel unfolds? Why or why not? What would be the significance if true?