

COMPOSITION AND PUBLICATION

- “The year without a summer”. See P. Shelley’s preface, M. Shelley’s preface, and critical material pp. 165–211.
- About the 1818 text: “[The novel’s] first reviewers sharply criticized the anonymous novelist’s failure to moralize about the novel’s startling, even blasphemous, subject”, something that was toned down in the 1831 version (Norton p. 345).
→ See nº 4, 9, 19, 20, 25, 37, 45, 51

KEY ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

Who is the “modern Prometheus”? — Who is the hero, who is the monster? — Is the creature good or evil (or neither, or changing)? What about Frankenstein? — Which of the narrators (if any) can we trust?



Goya’s Capricho nº 43: “The sleep/ dream of reason produces monsters”

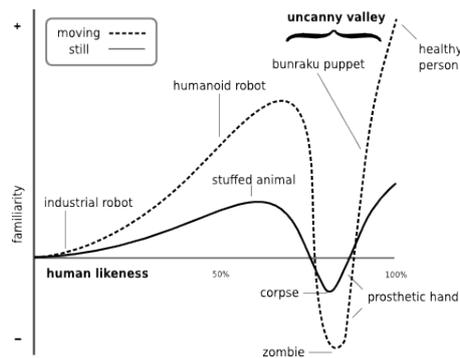
Fr. AS A HORROR STORY

- The contest started in Villa Diodati was about “stories of ghosts” “founded on some supernatural occurrence” (1818 preface; is the passage from that phrasing to “ghost stories” in the 1831 version the sign of a better-established genre?). But there is nothing actually “supernatural” in the final novel, which allowed critics to call it the first science fiction novel. *Frankenstein* is frequently called a **Gothic novel**, but the term as applied to it—or indeed in general—should be used with caution. Many elements do recall

features of the genre, especially that branch embodied by E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Devil's Elixirs*, Lewis's *The Monk*, Beckford's *Vathek* or Potocki's *Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, but with science replacing the supernatural.

→ See n° 18, 24, 29, 31, 32, 35, 52

• It is from Hoffmann's tale "The Sandman" that Freud elaborated his concept of "the uncanny" (*unheimlich*), or what is at the same time familiar and strange, and thus particularly horrifying. The monster's appearance probably falls into that category. It is certainly consistent with the theory of the "uncanny valley" developed by Masahiro Mori (1970)—as most movie incarnations, starting with Boris Karloff's, have realized. The monster is *almost* human, which highlights his status as a reject, and makes him more terrifying.



The uncanny valley (from Wikipedia)

THE BIOGRAPHICAL READING

• **Motherhood:** (See chronology pp. 521 sq.) Mary Wollstonecraft died in childbirth. In the summer of 1816, M.S., who was not yet twenty years old, had already lost a new-born daughter and given birth to a son (she would lose him and another baby in 1818–19). Percy was denied custody of his children from his suicide wife in 1817.

→ See n° 6, 7, 15, 30

• **William Godwin** was a renowned intellectual and writer (as was M.S.'s mother), but a negligent father who rejected her when she eloped with Percy Shelley. (Percy Shelley had also abandoned his first wife Harriet.)

The whole novel could then be seen as revolving around the fear of maternity and motherhood, from an insecure young woman, and/or the relationship between parent and offspring, from an embittered daughter—either consciously or unconsciously.

→ See n° 6, 14, 23, 53

• It has also been suggested that Victor Frankenstein shares much with Percy Shelley: his family circle (an adopted sister called Elizabeth), his education, radical ideas, etc. If this is so obvious, and considering that Percy helped in the writing of the novel, it may shed some light on how to interpret the character of Victor.

ROMANTICISM V. RATIONALISM: THE CULTURAL HISTORY READING

The novel can be seen in the context of the shift **from the Age of Enlightenment to the Romantic Era**, with their respective emphasis on reason and feeling (rationality and lyricism, sense and sensibility,

scientific knowledge and natural spontaneity).

Victor's education and trust in scientific progress (allowing mankind to dominate nature) are typical of the Enlightenment era. On the contrary, the monster's waking to the world (especially to nature), is expressed in typical Romantic terms. Ingolstadt was the birthplace (in 1776) of the Illuminati, a typical Enlightenment-era rationalist society.

If *Fr.* is a Romantic manifesto, and an indictment of over-reaching reason (Victor's *hubris*), then the 1818 dedication to Godwin is ironical. Conversely, Victor's undeniable scientific feat may be read as an endorsement of progress and rationalism. It is worth noting that the distinction is not so clear-cut in first-generation Romanticism, as witness the many-faceted occupations of Goethe, or Kant's and Burke's theories of the sublime.

The grotesque, unnatural combination of parts which characterises the monster and the novel itself is against (neo-)classical rules, but is part of the Romantic definition of the sublime.

→ See n^o 4, 10, 13, 22, 26, 27, 29, 40, 44, 47–50, 55

A REVOLT AGAINST NATURE: THE SCIENTIFIC & PHILOSOPHICAL READING

- For the scientific debates of the day as to life and its origins, see Norton pp. 404 sqq. The idea that a being is merely a machine, and could thus be artificially created, is central to La Mettrie's theories (he uses the phrase "*un nouveau Prométhée*" in *L'Homme-machine*) or Vaucanson's automata—thus raising the question of the soul, or what makes the difference between a human being and a mechanism (a *robot*, in today's terms; note that Lang's *Metropolis* can be seen as a version of *Fr.*). The 1750s notably saw Benjamin Franklin's electrical experiments (*Frank-lin?* But nowhere in the novel is it stated that Fr. uses electricity). The late 18th–early 19th c. also saw a whole series of geographical advances (e.g. James Cook) and attempts (the Northeast and Northwest Passages: Walton). A tenet of the Age of Enlightenment was that science would allow men to become "**like masters and possessors of nature**" (Descartes)—see the monster's (and Shelley's) vegetarianism (see also Genesis 1:29). This can be seen as opposed to a (Romantic) vision of **nature as transcendent**: see the Alps in *Fr.*, P.Shelley's "Mont-Blanc", or Friedrich's *Sea of Clouds* (1817) e.g.

- Godwin's theory (*Social Justice*, 1793) of the "perfectability" of man: original, innate goodness and benevolence allows for progress through reason and science (cf. also Erasmus Darwin, mentioned in the Preface. Note that Thomas Malthus developed his theories in reaction to Godwin's). This is opposed to Rousseau's vision of society as inherently corrupt compared to the original state of nature (the "noble savage"). See also Blake's dichotomy between innocence and experience as a fall.

Many thinkers of the time looked for a *tabula rasa* experiment as a way to determine **whether man is essentially good or not**. It may be interesting that the "wild boy of Aveyron" discovered in 1800 was called Victor. The monster's narrative of his education reads like Rousseau's *Émile*—but his awakening to conscience paraphrases Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (II, 1) (and can we trust him anyway?).

- N.B. The novel may be about science and knowledge as over-reaching *hubris*, but it is probably not about the dangers of technology, as later developments of the myth may imply.

→ See n^o 1, 3, 7, 10, 11, 16, 46, 47



The Curse of Frankenstein (1957)

A REVOLT AGAINST GOD: THE RELIGIOUS & PROMETHEAN READING

- From a Christian perspective, creating life is blasphemy, since it is God's prerogative, and so is wanting to know too much, as symbolised by the two trees in the Garden of Eden (the Tree of Life, the Tree of knowledge of Good and Evil, Genesis 2:9). In this light, one can see **Victor as an avatar of Lucifer**, who rebels against God (see Genesis, and Milton, quoted on the title page), and the monster is the manifestation of God's wrath, a portent (Latin *monere*, "to warn"; Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*: monsters reveal the will of God); Victor's leaving Ingolstadt could then be equated to Satan's fall.

Another way of seeing it is that **Victor is a God-like figure** creating a new Adam from base matter: usurping God's role is undoubtedly a sinful act. Is there a connection between Victor's *hubris* and the monster's *hybrid* nature?

→ See n° 8, 12, 16, 33, 36, 37, 39

- Victor's and the monster's pursuit across the world may recall the story of **the Wandering Jew**, who appears in several poems by P.S. as well as in Godwin's *St. Leon* and Lewis's *The Monk* (Lewis visited the company in Villa Diodati). Ahasuerus, who had mocked Jesus, was condemned to roam the Earth endlessly, which is also Cain's punishment (as William's murderer, the monster can be said to be a fratricide).

- A reference to Prometheus is introduced by the very subtitle of the novel, but which side of the myth is it: **Prometheus pyrphoros** (etymologically analogous to Lucifer) or **Prometheus plasticator**? The former refers to Prometheus's giving fire to mankind—in direct opposition to Zeus's orders: a Satan-like or Eve-like act of rebellion. The latter evokes Prometheus creating mankind out of clay: he is a figure of the Creator giving birth to a new race. Prometheus was punished by the gods and sentenced to have his liver eternally devoured by an eagle—just like Victor is endlessly eaten up by guilt and purchased by his creature?

Linked with the myth of Prometheus is that of Pandora, the first woman created by the gods and sent to Earth as part of Prometheus's punishment (a figure parallel to that of Eve). Compare the name Pandora ("endowed with all gifts") to the way Victor builds his monster?

→ See n° 17, 42–44, 52

- Previous legends of artificially-created beings include the Jewish tale of **the Golem**, which it is possible that M.S. knew about (from Jacob Grimm). Created from mud or clay, the golem was animated (but speechless and soulless) through a word written on its forehead, and which had to be modified or erased when the golem became too large and strong, and thus a threat to its owner. The golem is frequently compared with **the homunculus** that alchemists (including Paracelsus) claimed they could create.

THE POLITICAL READING

- Walton's letters are dated "17–", but the story has to take place after Goethe's *Werther* (1774) was published. It can thus be placed around the French Revolution; moreover, the novel was written in the immediate aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. Critics have construed it as a **metaphor for the Revolution**: a political experiment born from the Enlightenment and aiming at the rational creation of a radically new man, but which evolves into monstrous violence and turns against its creator. (Mary Wollstonecraft wrote about her living in France during the Terror.) If so, it may not be irrelevant that the Frankensteins are from French-speaking Geneva, the birthplace of Rousseau and the scene of violent political turmoil in the 1780s, pitting a radical populist faction against the aristocratic elite. Victor's Promethean revolt against Nature's or God's laws can be seen as a parallel to the people's rebellion against the Ancien Régime. It is worth noting, though, that in the novel—as opposed to most of the film adaptations—, we don't know whether Frankenstein comes from an aristocratic or bourgeois family.

To be compared to the monster's justification that he was driven to violence because of the injustice

and rejection that he suffered (but can he be trusted?), here is how Wordsworth described France under the Terror (*The Prologue*, x, 335-6):

“And thus, on every side beset with foes,
The goaded land waxed mad”

A less sympathetic reading would see in the monster an image of the (democratic) crowd, always an unruly mob which cannot be trusted and should not be let loose. The failure of the Revolution would then have been unavoidable. Hobbes (another thinker of the social contract, in many ways opposed to Rousseau) famously compared the “body politic” (the citizens) to a Leviathan, *i.e.* a gigantic monster.

- The historical context of the novel is also that of **the Industrial Revolution**: a new era brought on by progress, fraught with political and social questions and possible fear of the working class (see the violent revolt of the Luddites, 1811–16).

EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE

- Education is central to the accounts of all the major characters’ youth—Walton’s, Victor’s (and Clerval’s), the monster’s—revolving mainly around what books they read, and insisting on their being left alone to read them, rather than formally educated. **The influence on authors moulding one’s personality** is particularly visible in Victor’s switching from mediaeval alchemists to modern “natural philosophers”, and in the monster’s eavesdropping on the de Lacey’s reading sessions. This might be seen as pointing to *Fr.*’s being a cautionary tale—even though P.S.’s preface insists that it should not be read as such; it also evokes *L’Émile* and the debates of the time around education (see pp. 425 sqq.).

- *Fr.*’s structure being an example of **framed narratives** (Walton’s; Victor’s; the monster’s; the de Lacey story), we are given **different voices addressing different audiences** (narratees), and we should consider the probable purposes of each narrator, not forgetting that most (if not all) of them may have been edited (as Walton admits Victor did), covering each narrator’s agenda.

One major question here is: can we trust the monster’s account of events, especially considering that we have access to it only through Victor’s (and Walton’s) filter?

- If all the novel’s narrators are potentially unreliable, a striking feature of **the monster’s** is his **mastery of rhetoric**—especially for someone who has just learnt how to speak. (It is remarkable that in most film adaptations, the monster does not speak.) If much of what Victor tells us can be corroborated, not so for the monster: we have to take his word for it. Considering that his account is mostly intended to justify his acts and lay the blame on Victor, it should perhaps not be taken at face value. If there is a Luciferian/Satanic dimension in the monster, his power of persuasion is part of it.

- **“In the beginning was the word”** (John 1:1), and God creates the world through words (“Let there be...” Genesis 1:1, a major example of the performative use of language). Later (Gen. 2:19), it is Adam who gives names to things. In the novel, the monster has no name (whether given by Victor or himself), which may show how excluded he is from the natural order of Creation, or from society.

→ See n^o 2, 5, 12, 21, 23, 28, 34, 38, 39, 54

FURTHER SOURCES, PARALLELS AND ASSOCIATIONS

- **Genesis, Milton, “Mont Blanc”, Byron’s *Prometheus***

See pp. 289 sqq.

- ***The Rime of the Ancient Mariner***

In Coleridge’s poem (1797, revised edition 1817), the protagonist is condemned to wandering across the earth for having killed an albatross in the Arctic Ocean (a transgression against nature), until he redeems himself.

• **P. Shelley’s “The Wandering Jew’s Soliloquy”**

Is it the Eternal Triune, is it He
 Who dares arrest the wheels of destiny
 And plunge me in the lowest Hell of Hells?
 Will not the lightning’s blast destroy my frame?
 Will not steel drink the blood-life where it swells?
 No—let me hie where dark Destruction dwells,
 To rouse her from her deeply caverned lair,
 And, taunting her cursed sluggishness to ire,
 Light long Oblivion’s death-torch at its flame
 And calmly mount Annihilation’s pyre.
 Tyrant of Earth! pale Misery’s jackal Thou!

Are there no stores of vengeful violent fate
 Within the magazines of Thy fierce hate? (...)
 Where is the noonday Pestilence that slew
 The myriad sons of Israel’s favoured nation? (...)
 Or the Angel’s two-edged sword of fire that urged
 Our primal parents from their bower of bliss
 (Reared by Thine hand) for errors not their own
 By Thine omniscient mind foredoomed, foreknown?
 Yes! I would court a ruin such as this,
 Almighty Tyrant! and give thanks to Thee—
 Drink deeply—drain the cup of hate; remit this—I may die.

• **Faust**

Such elements as an old German university (an actual Johann Georg Faustus was expelled from Ingolstadt in 1517), alchemical works, and forbidden, *hubris*-ridden studies are reminiscent of the legend of Faust. But is it the German legend’s (or Marlowe’s) version, where his transgression is to concentrate on human endeavours and forget about God, or Goethe’s, with Faust trying to discover “the true essence of life”? Does Waldman qualify as a Mephistopheles-like figure? Does the monster? Can Justine, or Elizabeth, be compared to Gretchen?

→ See n° 17, 39, 41

• **The Tempest**

Prospero (through magic—mostly words) bends nature to his will. Compare the monster’s “Thanks to the lessons of Felix and the sanguinary laws of man, I had learned how to work mischief” (p. 101) with Caliban (*The Tempest* 1.2):

CALIBAN You taught me language; and my profit on’t
 Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
 For learning me your language!

→ See n° 23

• **Richard III**

I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
 Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
 Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
 Into this breathing world scarce half made up,
 And that so lamely and unfashionable
 That dogs bark at me as I halt by them —
 Why I, in this weak piping time of peace,
 Have no delight to pass away the time,
 Unless to spy my shadow in the sun

And descant on mine own deformity.
 And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover
 To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
 I am determined to prove a villain
 And hate the idle pleasures of these days.(...)
 And if King Edward be as true and just
 As I am subtle, false, and treacherous,
 This day should Clarence closely be mew’d up

MISCELLANEOUS REMARKS

- It is pronounced /ˈfræŋkənstaɪn/, not /-stam/— and this is obviously the creator’s name, not the creature’s. What to call the latter? “The Creature” and “the Monster” (with or without capital letters) are traditional terms; Shelley calls him “the Being” (Norton p. 214). The novel features the terms “monster” (27 times, mostly by Frankenstein), “fiend” (25), “daemon” (18), “creature” (16), “wretch” (15), “devil” (8), “being” (4), and “ogre” (1). Etymologically, a monster is a portent, a (divine) warning.
- Our edition retains the early 19th-century spelling: “to shew”, “wrapt” (wrapped), “it’s” for “its”, etc.
- The division of the novel into three volumes (which was abandoned in the 1831 edition) may have been a mere publishing convention.
- Note 2, p. 8: *Northeastern* passage, more likely, starting from Arkhangelsk.