

E-Learning Material

on

Mary Shelley: Frankenstein



**Department of English
Sankrail A.B.S. Mahavidyalaya**

Compiled and Circulated by

Mir Mahammad Ali

Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English

Sankrail A.B.S. Mahavidyalaya

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Literature in the 19th century

As the 18th century began to turn over a new leaf into the 19th century, literature too did a volte face and turned its back upon its then existing norms. From the immensely romantic and stylized literature of the past century, which embraced the improbable and the illusionary, literature of this new era i.e. the 19th century, turned to realism in a big way. The umbrella of realism covered under its shade realisms of different ilk like social, socialist, kitchen sink and natural, to name but a few. Realistic literature in principle abjured and shunned in to all subject matter that was unreal. In other words it accepted, adopted and garnered only those things to its bosom that were the matter of everyday life. Furthermore it also dealt with that which pertained to the lives of the common people. Everything and anything that was perceivable with the help of the senses was the new cause célèbre for literature and welcomed with open arms by the “new age” authors.



A Few Famous Authors

The Victorian era which was what this era was known as , produced rather prolifically, authors whose names have been etched forever in posterity. Mary Shelley, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Walt Whitman, Charlotte Bronte, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Louisa May Alcott, Thoreau and Jane Austen are but a very few of the stalwarts whose names will always shine like beacons in the literary sky. They are all known for amassing and producing fabulous works of fiction , which are not only eternal in their appeal but also path breaking in their content. For which lover of literature could possibly not have delved deep and emerged, satiated and replenished in their souls from books like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, *Walden Pond*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Nature* and the anthology of *Little Women*? All the authors of this time wrote works of fiction, non fiction, biographies and autobiographies that dealt with the extant realities of their times. It could be anything from issues relating to women, children, nature, the daily wage earners, the street walkers and to even the lowliest of the low.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was born in Somers in England into a household of educators and philosophers in 1797 on the 30th of August. Unfortunately when she was but a babe in arms, her mother passed away leaving the baby to be brought up by her father and elder sister. When the time came for her education, help came in the guise of her private tutor. On her father's remarriage, Mary's feathers were continually ruffled by her step mother and as both of them were consistently at loggerheads it was deemed fit that Mary be sent to reside with William Baxter, who was a known radical and a close friend of her father as well. By the time she was fifteen, Mary had

chrysalised into a bold young lady with a ravenous thirst for knowledge who embarked upon a torrid relationship with a much married Percy Bysshe Shelley. Naturally this caused them to be ostracized by society and as a result they were perpetually on the run. But, their fortunes too took a turn for the better and there came a time when Mary and Percy did get married and parent a son as well. The author in her penned quite a few memorable novels of which *Valperga*, *Mathilda*, *The Last Man*, *Lodore*, *Falkner* and *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* are notable for more than one reason and were very popular in their time.



The Story of Frankenstein (the modern Prometheus)

The novel Frankenstein was conceived rather incongruously by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, in a dream. It just so happened that once, when the family was holidaying at Lake Geneva, an inordinately wet summer kept them confined indoors most of the times. Recouring to reading and recounting German ghost stories, on these dismal days, proved to be their best bet and indeed a boon for this little group that consisted of the Shelley's, their son, John Polidori, Claire Clairmont and Lord Byron. One such afternoon Lord Byron proposed that each of them pen a story that dealt with either the supernatural or ghostly shenanigans at the very least. Even so, it was days before Mary could come up with even a germ of a story, much to her mortification.

One evening the gathered group and Mary were exploring ideas for Mary's story, Mary had a Eureka moment and began to explore an electrifyingly new idea that she had come across. Galvanisation was a thrilling new concept which had lately been explored by scientific students. It allowed for the passage of electrical currents through the body to get it twitching. That night as she slept, this very thought concretised as a dream which finally resulted in the novel Frankenstein. However, when it was first published in 1818 Mary was rather reticent about giving her name to the book which had not just been scientific, rather unorthodox, but was also religiously, and almost blasphemous.

The story begins as a series of correspondences from a Robert Walton to his sister, a Mrs. Margaret Saville. Robert is at sea in the higher reaches of Russia where the view hearkens him no end. Robert had not always been a sailor, he became one to overcome the ennui that stifled him. It saddened him but the reasons for his sadness were beyond him. Quite like Antonio's in the famed

Shakespearian drama *The Merchant of Venice*.

Ant. In sooth, I know not why I am so sad:

It wearies me; you say it wearies you;

But how I caught it, found it, or came by

it What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is

born, I am to learn;

And such a want wit sadness makes of me

That I have much ado to know myself

(The Oxford Shakespeare/Act1, Sc.1)

The life of a seafarer, buffeted by adventure, was very agreeable to him except for the fact that he yearned to meet a kindred soul, someone who would understand him and reciprocate his thoughts and innermost feelings. He voiced his angst to his sister " ...my dear sister, but I bitterly feel the want of a friend, I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a gentle yet capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own..." (Frankenstein-6).

His prayers of meeting the kind of the person he is searching for are answered when Victor Frankenstein is delivered almost on to his doorstep one morning, by the kind hand of providence. "... all the sailors busy on one side of the vessel, apparently talking to someone in the sea. It was, in fact, a sledge...but there was a human being within it ...A European...his limbs were nearly frozen, and his body dreadfully emaciated by fatigue and suffering." (Frankenstein/12)

Within a few days though good nourishment helped him to recover, he tended to remain morose and glum. With the passage of time however, his natural reticence started wearing down and taking Robert into his confidence he regaled the story of his extraordinary life.

Victor Frankenstein had been born into a noble Genevese family which had land holdings across the length and breadth of Europe. As the apple of his parents eye he wanted for nothing and as he regaled to Robert, “My mother’s tender caresses and my fathers smile of benevolent pleasure while regarding me are my first recollections.”(Frankenstein23) Life became even richer and better and the cup of the Frankenstein family brimmed over with happiness at the addition another brother and the adoption of young Elizabeth. Of course one must mention here the other occupant of Victor’s affections, his dear friend Clerval.

The young Victor joined Ingolstadt University at seventeen and once there he came in touch with the two professors. M. Krempe who was his professor of natural philosophy and M. Waldman, the professor of modern chemistry. Together they uprooted all the misconceptions that he had harboured in his bosom due to reading the extremely outdated books of Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus. He was told by his eminent professors at Ingolstadt that, “the ancient teachers...promised impossibilities and performed nothing. The modern masters promise very little... They penetrate into the recesses of nature and show how she works in her hiding places. They ascend into the heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe...” (Frankenstein40)

At Ingolstadt that Frankenstein was seized by an idea most profound. It seized and consumed him till there was naught that he could do but follow it through. He simply had to roll up his sleeves and

get down to the task of creating a being and also infuse it with life. For as he told Robert in their little shared cabin on the ship, "I doubted very much at first whether I should attempt the creation of a being like myself...but my imagination was too much exalted ...I doubted not that I should ultimately succeed. I prepared myself for a series of reverses...I considered the improvement which everyday takes place in science and mechanics, I was encouraged...I began" (Frankenstein47)

For two years, he abjured and shunned his family, his friends, his body along with all its needs and even the beautiful bounties of nature that had so enchanted and enthralled him before. He recounted to Robert that, "My father made no reproach ... of my silence... Winter, spring and summer passed away during my labours... So deeply was I engrossed in my occupation." (Frankenstein 51)

Till at last one night, his creation came to life. Alas! The moment that should have suffused him with boundless joy, filled him with repugnance and abhorrence, for when he beheld the monster, it was nigh about impossible for him to find one shred of joy within himself at so profoundly ghastly a creation. Frankenstein said during the recounting of those moments, "I had worked hard for two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body". For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and horror and disgust filled my heart." (Frankenstein 52)

So he did the next best thing that he could do. He turned his back on the gigantic monstrosity that he had carefully nurtured and created over the past two years and escaped back to the world that he had abjured for the past two years. Unfortunately, just when happiness seemed within grasp again,

a letter from his father informed him about the murder of little William. This made him realize that the evil monster was still hard on his trail and also the murderer of his brother. Once again Frankenstein drew into himself; once again he turned his back on the people who loved him the most. Once again he abandoned all the joys that life had laid out for him and escaped to the village of Chamounix. On beholding the icy vastness of the mountain ranges he prayed to their spirits to, "...take me, as your companion, away from the joys of life."(Frankenstein103). And that was when he beheld the monster again.

Bitterly and roundly did the creator and the creation hurl accusations at each other. The former for the murder of his little brother William, while the latter denounced him roundly for creating him and then leaving him untended and uncared for at the mercy of mankind. Said the monster to him, "...am miserable beyond all living things !... You purpose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life? ...Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind."(Frankenstein104) when at last the daemon had vented out his anger and his angst, his frustration and his chagrin at being denied even a modicum of love and understanding by each and every human being whose path he happened to cross; he ended off by saying that he would trouble no man ever again provided Frankenstein created for him a companion to love and to cherish. Understanding the pathos underlying the pathetic condition of the monster, Frankenstein at last agreed to create a lady monster for him.

However a new day was also another day and once again Frankenstein embarked on one of his famously long travels, to buy himself some time because he was willing to try anything to procrastinate the inevitable creation of the second monster. However a promise is a promise and if nothing else Victor Frankenstein was a gentleman who kept his word, "I now also began to collect

materials necessary for my new creation, and this was to me like the torture of single drops of water continually falling on the head. Every thought that was devoted to it was an extreme anguish, and every word that I spoke in allusion to it caused my lips to quiver, and my heart to palpitate.”(Frankenstein178) And yet quelling every qualm he did finally create a she monster for the monster.

When all was done and complete and wanting only was the spark of life to awaken her, hideous doubts began to assail him:

I was now about to form another being of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten times more malignant than her mate and delight, for its own sake in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighborhood of man and hide himself in the deserts, but she had not...They might even hate each other; the creature who already lived loathed his own deformity, and might he not conceive a greater abhorrence for it when it came before him in a female form?...Had I right , for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations...I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace at the price, perhaps, of the existence of the whole human race? (Frankenstein 187)

At the end of his reverie it just so happened that he looked up and gazed with a start upon the monster, which in any case was never too far behind him. This vision once again filled him with repugnance and without further ado or remorse Frankenstein willfully destroyed the she monster. The monster then promised to make his creator”s life so full of misery that only death would

offer him final salvation. The monster uttered ominously just as he was leaving “It is well. I go; but remember, I shall be with you on your wedding night.” (Frankenstein190) And with those dread laced words he disappeared into the night.

It is said that time cures everything and for Frankenstein too as the vagaries of life took over, he slowly but surely put his past life behind him. Till one fine day when he re united with his father after being wrongly interred in an Irish prison. But then too misery dogged his footsteps as he was informed about the murder of his dear friend Clerval. Once again Frankenstein understood only too clearly that none other but the monster had murdered his dear friend as well. The only mitigating aspect in his life at this time was his father and of course Elizabeth”s insistence that they marry as soon as possible. Brushing aside his fears and taking all possible precautions, Frankenstein prepared to wed his beloved Elizabeth.

The day of the wedding dawned. “Elizabeth seemed happy; my tranquil demeanor contributed greatly to calm her mind. But on the day...she was melancholy, and a presentiment of evil pervaded her; and perhaps she thought of the dreadful secret which I had promised to reveal to her on the following day...” (Frankenstein220) the wedding took place and all was as well as it should be. The weather was fair, everyone who had assembled for their nuptials, guests and officials alike were happy for this young and so obviously in love, couple. The sun was shining in the heavens and all seemed well with the world. Except for Elizabeth, who try as she might, could not shake off the feeling of doom and seemed rather inordinately down crested most of the day. Frankenstein in the meanwhile had taken the utmost care to make sure that there was not one nook or cranny which was left unattended and unbarred. Nothing was left by him to chance, and every precaution had

been undertaken by him to keep the monster out.

Yet, something just would not let him enjoy the day to the hilt. Some presentiment of evil and impending doom made him explain to Elizabeth". This night, and all will be safe, but this night is dreadful, very dreadful."(Frankenstein223). And then within minutes of Elizabeth"s retirement to their bedroom, a couple of chilling screams from Elizabeth made him rush helter skelter to it , only to find , "...the body of Elizabeth, my love, my wife, so lately living..." (Frankenstein-224) there was nothing much to be done after that because after all the hue and cry and the shock following dreadful murder"s aftermath had died down, all that remained for Frankenstein was the utter and abject sadness which was thereafter to remain his only faithful companion.

Once again in search of the monster Victor scoured and sourced all the places where he might be found. Till finally, he was saved at sea by Walton"s ship and that was where his tortured soul finally passed away. Not unsurprisingly however, here too the monster did not let go of him easily. Perhaps of all those who mourned Frankenstein, the monster mourned him the most bitterly. His grief in fact was boundless because not just had Victor been freed from all earthly troubles (and that included the monster as well) but with the passing away of Frankenstein, too had passed away forever the littlest chance that there might have been of the creation of a lady monster. With deep repentance and remonstrations did the monster mourn the demise of his creator because deep in heart of hearts that Frankenstein had suffered irreparably only because of his vile and heinous actions. His boundless guilt would offer him no reprieve ever and thus after he had poured his heart out to Robert (who was also present in the cabin then) the story and the saga of Frankenstein ended with the monster escaping into the night after pledging to immolate him.

Allusions to Prometheus

The mythical Prometheus was a crafty Titan who after creating man did everything in his power to aid him. He stole the best part of the feast from the gods to nurture his creation and then came into direct conflict with Zeus when he stole the sacred fire from under his very nose and presented it to the humans, in a fennel stalk. A very incensed Zeus devised a hideously painful punishment for him by tying him to a stake on top of a mountain, where an eagle would come by and feast on his ever generating liver.

Frankenstein is referred to as the modern Prometheus because he aimed like his predecessor to emulate the gods themselves and create a living being. The monster that he created was like the eagle who wouldn't let him be in peace and tortured him literally to death.



The Plot

Frankenstein"s plot was remarkably forward and modern for its time because not just was it causal in its sequence, it was also tightly knit in its telling. The action segues seamlessly from scene to scene. The main characters are the creators of their own destiny who create their own incidents as well as the events that arise out of them. There is no unseen factor or even a supernatural factor that accounts for the mishaps that occur in their lives. Hence, all of Frankenstein"s sorrows arise from his over whelming desire to emulate the penultimate creator. He does create and not just the monster but all of the miseries that follow him thereafter. It begins with a curiosity which crescendos upto to a stridently self flagellating action on the part of Frankenstein, building up finally to his creating the monster and then naturally at the end is the inevitable death of both the mainstays in the story. Thus, the parabola of construction and the Aristotelian concept of catharsis

are faithfully adhered to.

The plot maintains its integrity and its thrill but at an immense cost to Frankenstein. The plot impoverishes and saps all the characters of their vital life force as it rolls forward like the inevitable juggernaut. It is not fantastical. It is not prophetic either rather it is a realistic plot where the realities of daily life are prodded and stoked to highlight the making of a consummate tragedy.

The Setting

The story of Frankenstein has mesmerized readers ever since it was first published in 1818. It was first published without its young authors name , because at merely twenty years of age It is intensely gothic in nature with dollops of the romantic elements to impart it the requisite flavor of a tragedy. Thematically it is set mostly in the cold and often icy climes of Italy, Germany, England, Scotland, Russia and Upper Europe. Then there are the unnatural deaths and even murders which set the feeling and the tone of the book at sub zero levels emotionally. The reader is often investitured by the Brrrr...factor on reading the book and this coupled with the overall atmosphere of doom and personal angst of the characters, further deepens the feeling of foreboding and despondence as the story carries on.

Though the setting is mainly sere, it does have its uplifting moments. It moves in almost montage like sequences to the salubrious climes of southern Europe during the good times in the story and that is when the happiness quotient is introduced to uplift its mood.

The Theme

Thematically it explores the biblical concept of the fallen angel Lucifer and also the Garden of

Paradise. Like Lucifer who aimed to usurp God's throne and was tossed out of heaven into hell for his pains, the monster too was doomed to a lonely and a miserable life of roaming the earth without a soul to call his own. All because he aimed to be like his creator and have a woman to call his own and thereafter parent a race of their own.

The next biblical allusion that suffuses the story is that of the Garden of Paradise. God warned Adam and Eve from eating the fruits of the tree of knowledge but curiosity won the day and they were henceforth banned from their paradise. Frankenstein too could not withhold his curiosity and sought to empty the cup of scientific knowledge, and in the event hastened his own doom.

The thematic concept of the monster itself was fashioned from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and has shades of Shakespeare's Caliban from *The Tempest*

Critical Analysis

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* competently envelopes the glaring dichotomy between Nature and Science that had begun to fracture society in its era. The monster being a product of science can only forever yearn for societal acceptance, however as he is not naturally born, that acceptance is eternally denied to him. The underlying message in the novel is clear. Nature is Eternal Truth and Science can at best only harbor aspirations to emulate it, it can never be an alternate Truth, at par with Nature. The monster and Victor are alter egos, each reflects the discrepancy of the other's character. Both have a problem in communication with society. The former desperately wants to communicate but lacks the necessary skills (at least in the beginning), while the latter, perhaps because of an overwhelming ego finds it difficult to relate to normal people. Here too the novel

reflects the emerging influences of Freudian psychoanalysis and the Darwinian code of the survival of the fittest.

Did You Know ?

- i. Mary Shelley and not as otherwise presumed Percy Bysshe Shelley was the author of the novel Frankenstein?
- ii. The first edition of the book which was published in 1818, did not proclaim the name of the author because she was only seventeen at the time.
- iii. Frankenstein was the name of the monster's creator, in fact the monster had no name.
- iv. The novel Frankenstein was born out of a contest between family friends which consisted of Shelley's, Byron and John Polidori.
- v. All those who took part in this contest ultimately faced tragic deaths.
