

A Science Fiction in a Gothic Scaffold: a Reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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Abstract

Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus is a unique blend of two genres: Gothic and science fiction. While it follows the gothic convention of tale within tales, its epistolary framework and keeps intact its unrestrained lengthy articulations, it explores at the same time the innovative marvels of modern science. The fire that Prometheus stole from Zeus to help mankind is ingeniously replaced in the novel by the spark of electricity. The novel also puts to question some traditional social assumptions.

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While *Epic of Gilgamesh* is considered to be the primal text of science fiction many consider *Frankenstein* to be the first science fiction in English (1818). *Frankenstein* is a science fiction. It is also a gothic novel. The anecdote of the cold and wet summer of Geneva is well known, where simply to assuage the monotony, Lord Byron had proposed that each present should write a ghost story. Amongst those present were Mary and Percy Shelley, Claire Clairmont (Mary's stepsister) and Lord Byron along with his physician friend, Joseph Pollidori. All had undertaken the task but were soon wearied of it. Mary was the only person to have written a complete novel. In her preface to 1831 edition Mary speaks of an awful dream that led to the conception of Frankenstein:

When I place[d] my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw -- with shut eyes, but acute mental vision,-- I saw the pale student of 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. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handywork, horror-stricken. He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade; that this thing, which had received such imperfect animation, would subside into dead matter; and he might sleep in the belief that the silence of the grave would quench for ever the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life. He sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes.

Critics, however, eye the passage with skepticism. Many hold that the novel is in fact based on valid scientific research and that it also predicts a possible future discovery. Interestingly, the subtitle of the novel *The Modern Prometheus* refers to a figure in Greek mythology who stole fire from gods to help mankind. There also subsists a story of Prometheus the plasticator who is said to have created mankind out of clay. The two myths when amalgamated together makes the fire itself a symbol of animation of life. In the novel Victor Frankenstein defies god by creating life himself.

Frankenstein is introduced as a student with an ardent yearning towards understanding the secrets of nature (p37). His father is 'not scientific' and therefore, he receives/ [instead of has] no proper guidance in childhood.

He has to struggle, for gathering scientific knowledge with a 'child's blindness' (p38). He reads Cornelius Agrippa with enthusiasm and his father's comment that "it is a sad trash" only serves to increase his avidity. He eventually buys volumes of Paracelsus and Albert Magnus. Thus, Mary gives us a logical development of Frankenstein's interest from the 15th Century occult philosopher and alchemist, whose volume *De occulta philosophia libri tres*, was then treated as modern occult study, to the natural philosophers and alchemists like Albertus and Paracelsus, who are linked because of their impressive theory of elixir of life. Albertus is also credited with the discovery of arsenic and silver nitrate.

Victor Frankenstein primarily undertakes, but fails to fulfill his ambitions by studying alchemy. It is with his introduction to modern science that he is able to discover, what is called in the novel, the 'astonishing secret'. When the first teacher he meets at the university dismisses alchemy with impatience, Frankenstein remains unconvinced. He is yet unwilling to accept a science that could replace his fantasy with realism. He, however, finds a way of reconciling the promised grandeur of alchemy with reality under the influence of the arguments placed by the second professor. This Professor, M. Waldman says:

The ancient teachers of this science ...promised impossibilities, and performed nothing .The modern masters promise very little; they know that metals cannot be transmuted, and that the elixir of life is a chimera. But these philosophers, whose hands seem only made to dabble in the dirt, and their eyes to pour over the microscope or the crucible, have indeed performed miracles. 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. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows.(p.47)

Central to Victor Frankenstein's thinking is the incident of the scorching of the oak stump, struck by lightning. "I never beheld anything so utterly destroyed". (p,39) This leads to Frankenstein's ensuing discovery of the cause of generation of life. Here an obvious law of electricity was evident that 'a man of great research and natural philosophy' introduces Frankenstein to. In the 1818 edition Victor Frankenstein hears of Franklin's research with electricity from his father. The 1831 edition dismisses the father as unscientific, and introduces galvanism, (p,39) as a technique of invigorating nerve

impulses. Mary Shelley had no formal schooling, but she was well read. She was aware of Luigi Galvani's experimentation (University of Bologna, 1780) that had demonstrated that electricity flows through nerves. The scientific society was thrilled by the possibilities of this energy. Researches were enthusiastically conducted throughout Europe on its application. An attempt was also made to bring Harriet Shelley back to life after her suicide by drowning (December 1816) by applying electric shocks.

Ingeniously, Mary Shelley attempts no specific details of Frankenstein's experiments and discoveries. His report of his own credit is also imprecise: "I made some discoveries in the improvement of some chemical instruments which procured me great esteem and admiration in the university." (p,51)

Instead, the novel provides us with the details of the education that Frankenstein's scientific mind is exposed to. First, he becomes acquainted with science of anatomy and observes the 'natural decay and corruption' of the human body. Next, he studies the 'cause and progress' of this decay, and spends his days and nights in the vaults of charnel houses. Next, he observes how the good health of human beings is despoiled and wasted as he ages. He analyzes and examines even the trivial causes 'as exemplified in the change from life to death, and death to life'. This approach of Mary Shelley helps to establish that what Frankenstein creates is by way of experimentation and not by magic:

Not that like a magic scene it all opened upon me at once: the information I had obtained was of a nature rather to direct my endeavours so soon as I should point them towards the object of my search,...I was like the Arabian who had been buried with the dead, and found a passage to life, aided only by a glimmering, and seemingly ineffectual, light. (p.53)

Alchemy is hollow because it only has reference to dreams, modern science is effective and can become justly miraculous because it unravels nature so as to ridicule the imperceptible world with its "own shadows". In empirical research and inspection nature is perceived through dispassionate apparatus rather than by the aspiration or imagination. Frankenstein eventually finds out that this new discipline can also be used to engineer a product of human imagination. Though later in the novel his scientific instruments are identified with the creation of the monster himself, Frankenstein's mission is made explicit as selfless and messianic:

A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent nature would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. (p,55)

Again it is because of his consideration of the human species that Frankenstein refuses to create the mate for his monster, the Eve for the Adam and destroys what he had begun to create under the fervent request of the monster.

If we press for a literary antecedent for Mary Shelley's novel it would rather be Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1805) that deals with the efforts of decision about what to do with life, and not the popular gothic novel, Mrs. Radcliff's *Mystery Of Udolpho* (1794) that was famed to have the power to scare its readers. In Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* we hear a character say:

The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure. The *Mysteries of Udolpho*, when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again; -- I remember finishing it in two days -- my hair standing on end the whole time.

Frankenstein clearly carried no such intentions. Though a popular notion associates Frankenstein with Bram Stokers *Dracula* (1897) the two novels are diverse in tenor, argument, and objective. *Dracula's* monster is not monstrous in appearance but is gruesome in deeds. The evil in him is irremediable. The creature that Victor Frankenstein creates is monstrous in appearance. First, he is oversized, secondly, his features are related to each other by contiguity, they and are not distinguishable as external features separately from the muscles and arteries that are also coarsely discernible. The contrast that is introduced with the lustrous black hair and pearly white teeth becomes drastically negligible in his eyes. His 'watery eyes' are 'almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets'. He has wrinkled skin and straight black lips. His physical appearance is therefore repulsive. If we reflect, we find that, human beings do not appear more coherent than the corporeal disjointed display that the monster represents. Victor Frankenstein's creation is, thus, in a sense a breakdown of the unified vision of man into contradictory assortment of qualities that presents the very idea of representation of man as an unjustified, disordered and hideous matter. But the ugliness of the monster initially encloses a loving and tender disposition. It is noteworthy that the creature Frankenstein creates lacks a name. He is variously called 'monster', fiend' and 'wretch'. Although he is meant to be a man-made marvel who would "pour a torrent of light into our dark world", who as "a new species who would bless" its creator (p,55), he, in fact turns out to be a parody, a dismal/pathetic joke just as Frankenstein himself turns out to be a parody of Prometheus, or a kind of fiendish parody of Milton's god. Victor Frankenstein's behavior seems reckless and preposterous despite all his methodical application in the field of science. He receives his creation with scorn and horror solely for the reason of his physical appearance. He thoughtlessly and heartlessly discards him immediately after creating him. It does not occur to him that the new born, the oversized baby, ludicrously grotesque, is thereby left helpless in an environment of hostility where nature itself is feral. Later, in his confession to Captain Walton, Frankenstein, however, reflects on the unpredictable "feelings of human nature", reports how he, who had selected his features to be beautiful, had laboured hard for almost two years "for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body" (p,59) flees after he discerns his creation:

I beheld the wretch-the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, and rushed down stairs. I took refuge in the courtyard belonging to the house which I had inhabited ;where I remained during the rest of the night, walking up and down in the greatest agitation, listening attentively catching and fearing each sound as if it were to

announce the approach of the demonical corpse to which I had so miserably given life.(p,60)

Thus the creator himself, who in Walton's appreciative judgment, is 'noble', 'cultivated' and a 'celestial spirit' is not without contradiction himself:

In my education my father had taken the greatest precautions that my mind should be impressed with no supernatural horrors .I do not ever remembered to have trembled at a tale of superstition, or to have feared the apparition of a spirit. Darkness had no effect upon my fancy; and a churchyard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life, which, from being the seat of beauty and strength, had become food for the worm.(p, 52)

Yet when he remembers the creature he had given life he exclaims:

Oh! No mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived. (p,61)

Frankenstein remains blind to the fact that he has let loose a power in the world, that he himself has assumed to be fearful, and even though the creature may not be aesthetically agreeable, he must remain accountable to his creation. Nevertheless, Frankenstein shrinks away from all responsibility and emphasizes that he is irreproachable of all transgression expect for the act of creation itself. Frankenstein, in effect, turns out to be an idealist and naïve young man who nonetheless has faced great and unparallel adversity. Despite the monster's fervent appeals Frankenstein's concerns assumingly remain with the well being his own species. In contrast to Frankenstein's ostensible immobility, his helpless creation, frequently called the monster, is active. His love for his creator is unreciprocated and despite all his pleadings, he succeeds in making little favorable impression on Victor Frankenstein:

I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king, if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owest me. Oh Frankenstein be not equitable to every other, and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection is most due. Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but rather the fallen angel, whom thou from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded .I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.(p,112)

Mary Shelley would have been delighted to watch *Shrek* in which the storyline swaps the fairytale stereotypes, where the charming handsome fairytale hero finally surfaces to be mean and selfish, and the ogre, neither courteous nor handsome is revealed as the actual Hero with the big heart. Furthermore, when Fiona is released from her curse by the true love's kiss she does not become the predictable princess but turns into an ogress forever and Shrek assures her and the spectators that she still is beautiful. The tale flouts all our traditional assumptions of good and bad. The inner qualities are unconventionally shown to exist independent of all apparent assumptions.

In the (2007) Zemeckis adaptation of the Anglo –Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* we find an unsullied treatment of Grendel, who is portrayed as one who is misunderstood rather than evil. The culpability of Grendel's hostility falls on the humans who sinned against him and therefore invited retribution. The original poem gives us the impression that the monsters are outcasts because they're bad. As professor Stephen T. Asma proposes, the new film humanizes the monster and tries to articulate that the monsters are considered evil because they are outcasts.

In *Frankenstein*, as Frankenstein's creature is a monster by physical appearance, love is denied to him and the man directly responsible for his tragic state repeatedly presses that he is not liable. With the gradual development of the novel's incredible subterfuge, the supposedly inhuman figure is rendered increasingly human, while his human creator is rendered inhuman, frozen much like the arctic landscape, in an attitude of meticulous rejection. When Frankenstein tracks the demon into the snowy regions, the demon helps him in his search, and even leaves food for him but Frankenstein supposes that good spirits direct his steps:

Sometimes, when nature, overcome by hunger, sunk under the exhaustion, a repast was prepared for me in the desert that restored and inspired me. The fare was, indeed, coarse, such as the peasants of the country ate; but I will not doubt that it was set there by the spirits that I had invoked to aid me. (p,238)

It is unusual that a man of such scientific knowledge should believe in 'good spirit'. The creature's appeal is so lost on him that he tells Walton that another scientist might as well succeed where he has been unsuccessful.

In this parable many archetypal chords are struck by the demon. He reiterates in a condensed form, as Frankenstein consents to hear his whole tale from the moment of his birth to the moment of their meeting (Chapters XI-XVI), the history of man's racial consciousness. He learns to speak, read, write, discovers the importance of fire, the meaning of a home and the value of different human emotions by closely watching the De Lacey family. The evils of society is increasingly revealed to the monster as he continues to closely watch and hear the De Lacys. The naïve giant gradually learns of the division of property, of the evils of poverty, of virtue amongst mankind, of vice and bloodshed, of unfair distribution of wealth, of man made divisions of social ranks, and noble birth.

Through the monster's narration Mary Shelley attempts to explain the process of development of consciousness, how the material objects are gradually recognized and distinguished by a new born that later come to acquire meanings and signifiers:

It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original era of my being; all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct. A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard, and smelt, at the same time; and it was, indeed, a long time before I learnt to distinguish between the operations of my various senses. (p,115)

The monster reads three books of symbolic significance, Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, Plutarch's *Lives* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. He thereby comes to identify himself primarily with Adam but finally with Satan. He reminds us of the tragic figures like

Oedipus and Hamlet and of their incurable quest for the answer to the mysteries of life in his,

“...what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; ...was I then a monster ,a blot upon the earth ,from which all men fled ,and whom all men disowned?”(p,136),Or, “Cursed, cursed creator ! Why did I live? (p,155)

Interestingly, the readers do not identify themselves with Victor Frankenstein the scholarly, self-devoted scientist, but with the malformed creature whose awe and wonder at who he was, where did he come from, find a resonance in the reader's heart although he consciously distinguishes himself from the human species:

“Am I not shunned and hated by all mankind? You my creator , would tear me to pieces, and triumph; remember that, and tell me why I should pity man more than he pities me?” (p,166)

It is also curious that Mary's power of eloquence and also the novel's romantic unreciprocated love is expressed through the monster. He is thus, not simply a supernatural, gothic being, beyond the dominion of realism. The outlandish creature that is brought into existence by man's creativity is not merely a ghostly being or fairy tale reminder from gothic horror novel.

The wretched does not die within the story. He leaps out of the cabin window determined to make an end to his desolate life: “I shall die. I shall no longer feel the agonies which now consume me, or be the prey of feelings unsatisfied, yet unquenched.” (p,261)

Frankenstein's world questions the theistic assumptions of good and evil. That these are merely subjective perceptions is made explicit in the way the 'monster' is considered to be 'good spirit' , 'wonderful', when the De Lacy's benefit from his work, and regarded a monster when perceived by his physical appearance. In such a modern backdrop tragedy does not take place, predetermined by destiny as in Greek Tragedies , but is fabricated by man. While Dracula or the other Gothic tales are works of fantasies, *Frankenstein* has the hypothetical and the deterrent note of science fiction within the corpus of a gothic novel.

The fame that the novel had achieved after its publication makes us reflect on its innovative and unique thought that it incorporated at that time (1818/1831). While it followed the gothic convention of tale within tales, its epistolary framework with its unrestrained lengthy articulations that reminds us of the cursed mariner from Coleridge's *Rime of Ancient Mariner*, it can also be seen as a human response to the incontestable *Paradise Lost*. Its ingenious structure allows the creator and his creation, divergent, but closely linked voices, to apply Hegelian dialectic, a thesis and an antithesis. The novel was meant to portend the absence of any possible synthesis, and not simply to amuse, for, the word 'Prometheus' stands for the 'foreseer'.

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