

Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus (Semester 4)

Summary:

Frankenstein was first published in 1818 by an anonymous author. It was reprinted in 1823, but it was not until the revised third edition in 1832 that Mary Shelley was acknowledged as the author. As the quotation above suggests, this is not a simple story with a straight-forward interpretation. It is a story with many aspects and layers, some more transparent than others. At first glance, Frankenstein is a story designed to scare and shock its readers, and as such, it fits into the description given by Mary Shelley of its origins in a ghost-story contest. But a closer look, and a second reading, reveals its deep roots in a mind frustrated with her egotistical husband, but also with a patriarchal society where women had limited possibilities in comparison to their, what was supposed to be, male equals. Already two different interpretations present themselves: one which reads Frankenstein as a personal insurrection and critique of the author's life and circumstance, with a focus on lack of parental love and egotistical male figures, and another which reads the novel as a public critique of the patriarchal society and its shortcomings with a focus on the roles assigned to men and women. That it can be read as a critique of society and perhaps even as feminist criticism is also seen in the novel's treatment of science; the different forms and its implications. The Industrial Revolution from the 18th century had promised new possibilities and groundbreaking technology which would lead mankind, and the world, to success. The novel's handling of science can thus be seen as a warning in general terms, but can also be read as "A Feminist Critique of Science", as a chapter is titled in Anne K. Mellor's book,

Mary Shelley: Her life, Her fiction, Her monsters. Before going into a short summary of the novel, another perspective of interpretation should be mentioned: narration and characters. It is so, that Frankenstein, despite of being authored by a 27 woman, does not employ any female narration, but only three male narrators. The views and observations are thus all from a male perspective and no omniscient narrator interferes in order to bring out other perspectives. Furthermore, female representation is almost excluded from the novel, and the women that do appear are in correspondence to the view on women held by male authors, and are therefore presented as reflections of their male counterparts as mothers, daughters, sisters, or wives (following the theory of women's identity as depending on which room of the house she is suited in). Mary Shelley's choice of using male narratives solely, and her misrepresentation of women, will be discussed at a greater length later in the thesis. A summary of Frankenstein Frankenstein has been assigned to the genres of Gothic and of science fiction, and it contains elements from both of these genres. The name Frankenstein is, unlike common belief¹⁰, the name of the protagonist of the story Victor Frankenstein, a young man interested in science and knowledge. The story takes its beginning with a series of letters written by Captain Robert Walton to his sister, Margaret Saville. From his letters, the reader is introduced to Victor Frankenstein who enters the story when Walton and his crew encounter him on their voyage to the North Pole. The narration now shifts to Victor and the reader, and Walton, gets an account of his life and the circumstances that have brought him in his current situation. We hear of his early life and family relations before entering the 'real' story of his creation of a living thing from dead matter, and the horrors it generated. Victor's rejection of his creation, of his 'child', is apparently the reason for the unfortunate and disastrous turn the story takes when Victor's younger brother is found in the woods, murdered. Victor, well-aware that it is his creation that is responsible for this death says nothing and is thus responsible for the imprisonment and death of an innocent woman,

Justine Moritz (a close friend of the Frankenstein family). Victor is contacted by the creature and the narration shifts to the creature's perspective. This is the most empathic and emotional narrative, and the reader feels sympathy for the creature as 'he' unfolds his story of rejection and hatred inflicted upon him due to his abnormal and monstrous exterior. The reason for referring to the creature as 'he' is grounded in the fact that he is not a human being in the technical understanding since he was created and assembled by dead, human body parts. He is a product of a scientific experiment, and at the same time, the other characters refer to him as 'creature' and 'monster', which all point to a non-human existence. However, throughout the story he is also referred to as 'he' (without the apostrophes), and as it turns out, he is the character who proves most human(e). In this project, he will therefore also be referred to as "he". The creature finds a hiding place in the woods, away from society, but not entirely excluded from human existence. He encounters the de Lacey family but he keeps his distance and does therefore not encounter them in the physical sense of the word. He observes them with a keen interest to learn about human nature and the trait that distinguishes man from animal: sensibility. He learns how to speak and feel, but with no human and emotional interaction, he at last turns to acting in accordance to his appearance and kills William, Victor's brother. The creature pleads Victor to 'make' him a mate, Victor agrees and the narration is once again from Victor's point of view. Victor abandons his promise of making a female creature because he feels that it would be too dangerous, and from that moment, the two become each other's mortal enemies. Victor devotes himself to killing the creature, but the creature kills everybody around Victor because he cannot kill his creator. It is in Victor's pursuit of the creature that the narration reaches its final destination, with Walton, who ends the story.

NARRATIVE:

Frankenstein has a symmetrical structure. As mentioned earlier, the story is told by the three male narrators which begins with Walton, then Victor, it then moves to the creature, then back to Victor, and at last, to Walton again. It comes full circle. This creates a multi-layered form, where the narratives are, at times, within other narratives. The narratives within narratives, and the untold perspectives suggest, that there is no possibility of closure, where the shifting narrative excludes stability. The epistolary form of the novel and the triangular narrative, as Jansson describes it, is important to the story because: "... each of the three main characters has important conversations with the two others, and this triangular pattern also marks the exclusion of all other characters from the story" (Jansson 1999 in Shelley 1993: XIV). This exclusion of all other characters also reinstates the importance of the three male narrators and their role in the story, since they are the only ones given the power of voice and privilege to tell their story. Jansson, furthermore, points out Walton as the primary narrator. She sees his narrative as having several dimensions and functions: "He mediates the stories of Victor and the creature, and, at the beginning of the novel, Shelley also uses him to introduce some of the key themes" (Jansson 1999 in Shelley 1993: XV). This is also the triangular structure that was referred to earlier, where the narratives support and interfere with each other which create interdependency and express the relations between events of action, but also between the characters. The narrative form of the novel, furthermore, renders realism to the novel because it consists of letters, journals and notes which function as the different characters' testimonies. The story then appears to be an account of actual events, thus, adding to the horror of Victor's scientific experiment. The novel raises questions of the progress of science and Anne Mellor sees Mary Shelley's treatment of science as an "[...] implicit warning against the possible dangers inherent in the technological developments of modern science" (Mellor, 1989: 114). And who better to warn against scientific progress than

a male (though, fictive) scientist? This could serve as another reason why Mary Shelley chose male narrators: persuasive effect. Mary Shelley also used the narrative form as a tool to further her story and its concerns, and Jansson describes the creature's narrative as the heart of the story and at its heart, and that it mediates the key themes of abandonment, responsibility and the effect of environment. Since there is no omniscient narrator to guide the reader in the understanding and interpretation of the story, and of the different accounts offered, it is up to the reader to draw own conclusions. Beth Newman, in Jansson's Introduction to the novel, sees this as "[...] a deliberate strategy to destabilise the text: each narrator is telling a version of the story, not the version, and the reader is therefore invited to question the accounts offered" (Beth Newman quoted in Jansson 1999 in Shelley 1993: XIV). This is also why the story has been, and can be interpreted, in so many ways with various perspectives; with no omniscient (objective) narrator, the ambiguity with which the story is told is vibrant and the narrators' credibility is questioned. In this way, Mary Shelley concealed her own attitude towards the issues about science and exclusion of women that the novel inspired. That Mary Shelley chose an all-male voice to tell her story creates a certain distance between author and narrator, and as Jansson states in her introduction to the text "[...] it conceals the author from the reader" (Jansson 1999 in Shelley 1993: XIV). At the same time, it can have the effect of making it 'easier' for the male reader to identify with the story. Anne K. Mellor assigns Mary Shelley's choice of narration to 'anxiety of authorship': "Yet despite this tradition of female authorship, Mary Shelley doubted the legitimacy of her own literary voice, a doubt that determined her decision to speak through three male narrators (Walton, Frankenstein, the creature), the structure of her novel, and the revisions of her text" (Mellor, 1989: 53). Saying this, is equivalent to saying that a male voice is more legitimate and estimated than a female; that the story will seem more credible if it is told with a male voice. Mary Shelley could thus: "[...] sidestep concerns about her ability – indeed her right –

to produce a novel by concealing herself behind a range of narrators, all of whom are members of the sex 'authorised' to write and speak" (Jansson 1999 in Shelley 1993: XIV). Even though there was a female readership at this time, and Mary Shelley's works were enjoyed by women, her choice of male narration appears to be an attempt at obtaining accept and acknowledgement from the male audience.