Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote a number of novels, stories, and journals, some of which have only recently been rediscovered. Yet she is remembered almost exclusively for *Frankenstein*, a novel that she began writing at eighteen years old, a work that has impacted the literary world and the cultural and popular consciousness deeply. Scholar Anne K. Mellor writes, "*Frankenstein* is our culture's most penetrating literary analysis of the psychology of modern 'scientific' man, of the dangers inherent in scientific research, and of the terrifying but predictable consequences of an uncontrolled technological exploitation of nature and the female" ("Making" 9). It seems that Shelley left us a legacy of questions that we perhaps have yet to properly answer.

Literary scholars and historians wonder how a young woman of eighteen became emboldened and imaginative enough to create such a dark and original tale, yet biographers say that Shelley "was as remarkable for her self-possession as for her keen, intelligent mind. Only someone who knew her well could guess at the dark imagination operating behind her serene smile and large-eyed gaze" (Seymour 150). At the time that she began *Frankenstein*, she had already lost one baby and was deep into her relationship with Percy Bysshe Shelley, who was still married. Yet Shelley had no idea of the troubles that would ensnare her before long.

Only 500 copies of the first edition of *Frankenstein* were printed, and it was not immediately reprinted once those copies sold out. Shelley's significantly revised edition appeared in 1831, yet in 1823, the play *Presumption, or the Fate of Frankenstein* by Richard Brinsley Peake was staged in London. Peake created the "goofball servant … bumbling assistant … hunchback" character, while also in his play, Frankenstein calls out the now famous line, "It lives! It lives!" and the creature does not speak, all elements that are staples of the tale as we know it now (Hitchcock 83). "By the end of 1823 five different retellings of *Frankenstein* premiered in London" (Hitchcock 88).

Retellings of *Frankenstein* all seem to contain the same elements that are not in Shelley's tale: "an inarticulate monster, a bumbling laboratory assistant, an angry crowd in search of the monster, and a cataclysmic ending in which creature and creator perish together. The public eagerly grasped this monster of a story, told and retold it, reshaping it as they did" (Hitchcock 88). This is why the novel is still so compelling. Not because we already know the story, although most of us think we do, but precisely because we do not know the story, and Shelley surprises and fascinates us with themes, characters, suspense, and frights that endure.

*Frankenstein* was published anonymously at first, a common practice at the time. Ironically, it seems that by the time Shelley was identified as the author of the novel and a version of the story had achieved a degree of popularity, Shelley's own interest had waned:

> when, in later life, [Shelley] spoke of creature and book in one breath as 'my hideous progeny' and invited it to 'go forth and prosper', she was aware that dramatized versions had already drained its life-fluid while hugely increasing its fame. *Frankenstein*, as performed on stage, became a spooky comic melodrama while the Creature, seized on by political cartoonists, became a symbol of danger, subversiveness and menace. By 1831, when she wished her new edition commercial prosperity, her serious intentions had, like the Creature in the novel's closing words, been 'borne away … lost in darkness and distance' (Seymour 173).

Contemporary reviews wavered between disgust and fascination, calling the novel "audacious and impious" but also "praising the author's inventive talent and descriptive gifts" (Seymour 196). One reviewer laments that the novel "leav[es] the wearied reader, after a struggle between laughter and loathing, in doubt whether the head or the heart of the author be the most diseased" (Croker 385). At the same time, another reviewer gushes: "Frankenstein is, I think, the best instance of natural passions applied to supernatural events that I ever met with" (Anonymous *Knight's* 196).
In 1819, the year after *Frankenstein* was published, a pamphleteer wrote of Byron and his "Vampyre crew," noting that one of the "fresh monsters" the group (Polidori, Shelley, Byron) had created was "the wretch abhorred" by the name of Frankenstein. This is the first known instance of the creature being called by its creator's name, a habit that quickly caught on and never waned (Hitchcock 79).

Frankenstein has been translated into many genres and forms, most of them famous in their own day as well as now. Boris Karloff plays the creature in the 1931 *Frankenstein*, the 1935 *Bride of Frankenstein*, and the 1939 *Son of Frankenstein*. It is well known that Karloff had a soft spot for the creature, although he also played Victor Frankenstein in *Frankenstein 1970*, released in 1958. The first film adaptation of *Frankenstein* was Edison Studio's 1910 *Frankenstein*. Two decades after that saw the 1932 radio broadcast, and a host of adaptations followed, including Disney's *Frankenweenie*, *The Munsters* television show, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and Mel Brooks's *Young Frankenstein*. There are also movies about Shelley and the conception of *Frankenstein*, including *Haunted Summer*, *Rowing with the Wind*, and *Gothic*. Continuations and retellings persist in print, too, with books such as Theodore Roszak's *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein*, Peter Ackroyd's *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, and Dean Koontz's *Frankenstein* trilogy.

**Her Influences**

Mary Shelley's influences seem a bit heady to us now, given her literary parentage and the legendary circle of friends she kept as an adult. Clearly her strongest influences were her parents, feminist philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft, who died a few days after Mary was born, and William Godwin, revered novelist and intellectual.

In her adult life, Shelley met, ran away with, and eventually married Percy Bysshe Shelley, whose writing she worked to publish after he died in 1822. Shelley was friends with John Polidori, Lord Byron, Leigh Hunt, and Washington Irving, among others. Mary Shelley was not afraid to disagree with friends and family, positing views in her work that countered those of her husband and father. Her contemporary audience often missed the political commentary in her works, and only recently has she been recognized as an author and thinker in her own right, rather than a footnote to her father's or husband's lives.

It seems that Shelley's own life was perhaps her greatest influence. Her firstborn child, a girl, was born 18 months before the idea for *Frankenstein* came about. The baby died at two weeks old, and Shelley had a recurring dream that she recorded in her journal: "Dream that my little baby came to life again—that it had only been cold & that we rubbed it by the fire & it lived—I awake & find no baby" (Shelley *Journals* 70). It is not far-fetched to imagine a wish to create life or, more importantly, to reanimate a once-living creature, arising from this heartbreaking instance.

**Her Work**

Mary Shelley's work as a whole shows some of the influences of her professional and personal life. A familiarity with her life, however, is not necessary for doing intriguing analysis of Shelley's work. This volume will guide you through general approaches to her fiction. The remainder of this section will discuss some of the notable elements of Shelley's work: the patterns in her use of themes; her construction of character; the history and context of her writing; the philosophy underlying her book; and her use of symbolism, imagery, and language.

**Themes**

There is a range of themes in *Frankenstein* just waiting to be addressed in scholarly detail. Perhaps one of the most commonly discussed themes of the novel is "Victor Frankenstein's total failure as a parent" (Mellor "Making" 10). Mary Wollstonecraft writes, "great proportion of the misery that wanders, in hideous forms, around the world, is allowed to rise from the negligence of parents" (Wollstonecraft 246). Scholars often wonder what role Shelley's gender plays in this parenting theme in addition to considering the role her own life played. Her mother died only a few days after Shelley was born, and as a teenager Shelley was rejected, then shunned by her father after running off with Percy Shelley. Shelley biographer Miranda Seymour writes that *Frankenstein* can easily be turned into a biographer's sandpit, but Mary's story of promethean ambition, of rejection, the denial of love, and the danger of judging by appearances, was intended to carry the weight of a social message. What may have begun as an extension of the story of an Arctic explorer, or as a gothic tale for fireside thrills, was developed as a vehicle for ideas and
social criticism" (Seymour 173).

Characters

Shelley's characters may be the most unusual elements of the novel. A number of characters, in addition to the creature, are real and yet supernatural, endearing and infuriating, deeply flawed and frustratingly, unrealistically perfect. We can pose many questions about the novel and Shelley's possible intentions. She perhaps modeled characters after people in her own life, as she was known to do in other works. Maybe all of her characters fluctuate between best- and worst-case scenarios, and their unsteady senses of themselves lead them to fluctuate between good and evil actions. Perhaps all of her characters live in a morally nebulous in-between space, where simplistic distinctions cannot be easily made between good and evil, right and wrong, or black and white.

History and Context

The dramatic story of how Shelley first dreamed elements of the story of *Frankenstein*, and then longed to terrify her readers as she had been frightened by the dream, is fascinating, legendary, and possibly exaggerated. John Polidori, the only one of the group in Geneva who kept a journal at the time (or whose journal still exists), seems to contradict Shelley's dramatic story, yet the story's effect is still felt (Seymour 157).

The aspects of horror that are woven into *Frankenstein* stem from the creature's haunting words and aspect, from Frankenstein's reaction to the creature, and from both characters' ruminations on the world and humanity as a whole. Shelley was well informed about current events and does not hesitate to place current ideologies as well as criticisms of the same into the novel. An anonymous contemporary reviewer writes, "There never was a wilder story imagined, yet, like most of the fictions of this age, it has an air of reality attached to it, by being connected with the favourite projects and passions of the times" (Anonymous *Edinburgh* 249).

Philosophy and Ideas

As the daughter of two outspoken and well-respected writers, thinkers, and philosophers, it is not a stretch to imagine Mary Shelley holding a wealth of sharply defined views on any number of topics. *Frankenstein* alone is packed with views on religion, knowledge, and how the two are acquired, used, and, most importantly, misused. Percy Bysshe Shelley's review of *Frankenstein* claims that the novel's moral is "Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked" (Robinson 435). Is it that simple, though? Considering the radical ideological shifts that occurred just before Shelley's birth (the French Revolution) as well as during her lifetime (romanticism, the Industrial Revolution), it is easy to see how her philosophies and ideas could be numerous and ever changing.

Form and Genre

According to Mary Shelley's introduction to the 1831 edition, we have Percy Bysshe Shelley to thank for the fact that *Frankenstein* became a full-length novel: "At first I thought but of a few pages—of a short tale; but Shelley urged me to develope [sic] the idea at greater length. I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling, to my husband, and yet but for his incitement, it would never have taken the form in which it was presented to the world" (Robinson 442). While the length and complexity of the novel are partially attributable to the author's husband, it is less clear what influences supplied Shelley with the elements of science fiction with which she imbued her tale and heralded a new literary genre.

Shelley's status as a woman, not to mention a busy (and often grieving) wife and mother, make her stereotypically unlikely to become the first science fiction writer. The author's adage states, "Write what you know," and we wonder to what degree Shelley did this. This belief that the novel's themes were primarily motivated by autobiographical concerns has been taken up by many scholars who frequently link key elements of the book to Shelley's own parenting issues and grief over lost children. It helps us to understand how Shelley could have conceived these ideas in the first place. We will probably never know exactly how or why Shelley developed her ideas and launched a new genre, but we can see clearly that the work that resulted has stood the test of time.

Language, Symbols, and Imagery
You wake slowly to find a creature, larger than life, hideously ugly, part man, part beast, standing over you, staring with watery, yellow eyes. Does imagery get any more vividly immediate or potentially frightening than that? The irony of *Frankenstein* is that the imagery, symbolism, and language in the novel are vivid, fresh, and infused with elements of the fantastic and yet many of these central elements are altered in adaptations or retellings. These changes could be the result of other writers and screenwriters feeling they cannot improve on Shelley’s work or capture its subtleties and complexities, so they simplify Shelley’s approach and treatment, often fixating on the monstrous and macabre elements of the tale.

Another compelling aspect of the imagery in the novel is that it is accessible, clear and easy for readers to picture throughout. The suggestion of terror is more vivid than the actual acts of terror that drive the plot forward. We are told about the horrifying instances but never actually shown them. Perhaps Shelley's true genius in regard to imagery was in allowing the readers' imaginations to take over.

**Final Words**

While *Frankenstein*, in its original form, as Shelley conceived of and presented it, may give many of us nightmares, it eventually became a balm for Shelley herself. In the introduction to the 1831 edition, Shelley writes of the way the book soothes her: "And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper. I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days, when death and grief were but words, which found no true echo in my heart. Its several pages speak of many a walk, many a drive, and many a conversation, when I was not alone; and my companion was one whom, in this world, I shall never see more" (Robinson 442).

**Further Information**


Copyright © 2019 Infobase Learning. All Rights Reserved.