

# Fact or Fiction?

## Mary Shelley's vision of the limit of knowledge and Frankenstein's influences and significance

### Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus

The story explains the consequences of the experiments of an obsessed scientist, Victor Frankenstein, and is narrated by Robert Walton. Victor grew up at Geneva learning the works of old alchemists and became an expert in "Modern Science" at University. He later starts to be obsessed with "the secret of life" and finally succeeds as he creates an eight-foot tall living creature made of different parts of corpses, who escapes. At the beginning, the creature is naïve, but as he is repeatedly rejected by society, he becomes destructive. When Victor realises the consequences of his experiment, he decides to destroy it following him to the Arctic, where he meets Walton. Meaning to warn him, he tells him to learn "how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge". The book ends with both Frankenstein and his creature regretting their decisions, which lets them finally rest in peace.

### Mary Shelley's Life

Mary Shelley was born on 1797. Daughter of William Godwin, philosopher and novelist, and Mary Wollstonecraft, an educator and feminist philosopher, she became an essayist, biographer, short story writer, and novelist; and just as her mother, who died a few days after her birth, she led a complicated private life and suffered much ostracism due to her affair with the married man Percy Bysshe Shelley, which started in 1814. After losing a child, Mary and Percy married in 1816 and had three more children, but just one survived. Later, in 1822, Percy drowned and from then on she devoted herself to the upbringing of her son and a career as a professional author. Mary died on the 1st of February 1851, after struggling through her last years, most likely with a brain tumour.

### Inherited rationalism and a touch of romanticism

The resonance between Frankenstein and Mary Shelley's life is undeniable, starting with the rejection of the creature by his father. Godwin repudiated Mary and Percy as soon as he discovered their relationship and Mary thus was "guilty of a crime" in the same way the creature does in the book. Right after Frankenstein, Mary wrote a tale about incest between father and daughter – Mathilda – through which one can interpret Frankenstein as a story about a paternal figure who projects his own incestuous guilt upon his creature and, having made it monstrous, he rejects it. It is well known that Mary considered her father as a God and the novel is full of allusions to Milton's Paradise Lost, which also emphasize the image of Victor as a God since the creature often describes himself as an Adam or Satan figure.

### The fear of death

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein Introduction explains that because of the bad weather, they were often confined for days to the house of Lord Byron during their trip to Geneva and it was during one of these "confinements" that she had a revelation throughout the conversations between Lord Byron and Percy. Mary listened to the "nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated". And that led to speculations that: "Perhaps a corpse would be reanimated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth".

### Bibliography

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### The solution to death: galvanism

The level of influence exerted by Percy Shelley was evident although it also remains open to debate. It is well known that he maintained a keen interest in the world of natural philosophy as he had a strength relationship with Dr James Lind, an astronomer and geologist, who was also an expert in natural philosophy. Victor's studies at the University of Ingolstadt written in the novel seem to remind of Percy's scientific education, also recognizing Waldman (Victor's chemistry lecturer) as Doctor Lind. He and Cavallo used to conduct experiments towards the phenomenon of "Animal Electricity". Furthermore, in another letter, he discusses the application of electricity as a treatment on "the Brain of insane persons found upon dissection", based on his thinking that: "[...] there is great reason to believe that it may be of service in that disorder and appears to me to merit a fair trial".

### Significance of the book

Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus was written in 1818, almost two centuries ago and the most fascinating thing about it is its significance in both science and literature history. Percy Bysshe Shelley was fascinated with "the power of science to give life" because of his "believes in the omnipotence of man and the superfluosity of God". But, on the contrary, Mary was afraid of "the consequences of attempting to copy the 'mechanism' of nature" and that believing in the superiority of God over humans is represented in her story, as Victor Frankenstein is punished for his irresponsibility.

The story is a critical commentary of society and it describes the prototypic scientist and the consequences of his ambition, becoming a cautionary tale about the risks of scientific advances. The first motivation of Frankenstein is the ambition, as he suggests in the story and thus, Frankenstein is not motivated by a desire to serve mankind, but "to become one among those whose names are recorded in glory".

This novel has made a valuable contribution to horror literature and cinema. Its presence has been constant ever since it was written and its consequences had been innumerable. The form in which it is narrated and the matter itself arouses new emotions and provides human nature knowledge as it pushes it to its own limits when it confronts Victor and the creature's vital environments, converting them into antagonists rather than protagonists. That is why their encounter may end up in a mutual destruction.

It has generated many considerations as it has made people to think about the importance of the "ethical limit" during the development of science and its technical applications. What is interesting is the very timely moment it was written, when the thought of dominating nature throughout scientific knowledge started. Furthermore, Frankenstein has promoted the creation of some scientific fields, such as scientific politics or bioethics. The featured subjects of the book can be interesting for going in-depth on transhumanism.

Frankenstein (or Mary Shelley) thus warns society about the other side of science and its central theme becomes clear: Responsibility. We often forget that although science provides us many benefits, we must be careful about it and we should try not to be blinded by our thirst of knowledge. We cannot ignore how science has helped humanity to progress, but we should neither omit the atrocities made by the ones who do not see beyond their own fame.

**“Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be his world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow.”**  
— Victor Frankenstein