



# A Fable for All Times: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, by Wendy Lesser

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# The Interpretation of Dreams

- *Frankenstein* depicts a physically **repulsive hero** who woos through his **eloquence**, and a morally blinded **father** who unfairly renounces his child.
- Mary Shelley's masterpiece, like those of Poe and Kafka, has the strange truth of a **dream**. It originated in a dream.

# The dream was so frightening.

- *"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.*

# The Taming of the Dream

- Mary Shelley begins to **impose connections** and causalities, to shape the untamed, unwilled dream toward a moral lesson:
- "**Frightful** must it be, for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavor to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his **odious** work, **horror-stricken.**"

# He sleeps; but he is awakened...

- But the "hideous phantasm," the "hideous corpse," does not just die off politely; instead, it nastily, horridly, coldly **intrudes** on its maker: "*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.**

# Abandonment and *Doppelganger*

- The scientist simply abandons his progeny. **"Unable to endure** the aspect of the being I had created," says Victor Frankenstein, "I rushed out of the room and continued a long time traversing my bed-chamber, **unable to compose** my mind to sleep. At length lassitude succeeded to the tumult I had before endured, and I threw myself on the bed in my clothes, endeavoring to seek a few moments of forgetfulness."

# Paralysis of Dreams

- Philip Stevick astutely compares it to the **failure of dreams** an interpretation strengthened by Mary Shelley's language, which awkwardly and obsessively stresses impotence ("*Unable to endure... unable to compose...*") in the first sentence describing Frankenstein's flight.

# Dreams of Life and Death

- His dream also draws the essential **link between life and death** that pervades the novel: the monster's life, which stems from death ("the hideous corpse"), also *leads to a number of deaths* – including, ultimately, his creator's and (possibly) his own.



# The Heart: the Undiscovered Country

- Mary Shelley felt that authors "turn to the human heart as the undiscovered country. They **visit** and **revisit** their own; endeavor to understand **its workings**, to fathom its **depths**, and to leave no lurking thought or disguised feeling in **the hiding places**.

# The Absent Mother

- Like King Lear, Frankenstein is essentially a world without mothers, a world where **fathers** have to fulfill the range of **maternal and paternal**.
- The renounced, exiled monster (mourns his orphan state, complaining that "No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses.")

# “Dr. Frankenstein” or “Dr. Faustus”?

- Frankenstein is read as an attack on **scientific hubris**, an exploration of the **dangers** that arise *when humanity's technological capabilities **outpace its wisdom.***
- Victor himself makes this explicit, for instance, when **he urges Walton** to tone down his zeal in his scientific expedition to find the North Pole.

# The Heart of Darkness

- The desire to control nature through science is part of a **larger desire** for control and mastery.
- "The soul of man is a dark vast forest, with *wild life in it*. Think of Benjamin fencing it off!" D.H. Lawrence

## *Veni, vidi, vici.*

- Frankenstein advises us that "if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved, Caesar would have spared his country, America would have been discovered more gradually, and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed."
- For Mary Shelley, as for D.H. Lawrence, the scientist, the explorer, the empire-builder, and the story-teller all share the same potentially **destructive zeal**.

# Creating Novels!

- Like Frankenstein's creature, Mary Shelley's novel wears the signs of its unique origins: its **awkward movements** and **rough seams** are the symbols of its *miraculous birth*. Like the monster, it is lovable for its eloquence, but also for its repulsiveness, for only in the latter can we see reflected our most carefully **hidden fears**.

# Frankenstein Lives in 2017.

- The use of multiple narratives is itself a commentary on the complex nature of truth.
- Walton, watching from the cabin of his ship, tells us that the creature "was soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance."
- But this doesn't literally mean he was lost at sea; it simply means that Walton **lost** sight of him.
- Frankenstein lives in theatre, film, TV, and in the mind of *Frankenstein* readers.

# Reference

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*Wendy Lesser*

ONE'S FIRST response to *Frankenstein* is amazement that a girl just turning nineteen could have composed such a work. Then one pauses to rethink. Would it be any less amazing if

wedlock daughter as a result of a previous love affair), Mary Shelley exhibited a fine disregard for the social proprieties. She came from a circle of social radicals, and she joined a circle of social

- Lesser, Wendy. A Fable for All Times: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. *The Threepenny Review*, No. 49 (Spring, 1992), pp. 17-19



# Practice makes perfect!

- Discuss the characteristics of Gothic literature manifest in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.



**THANK YOU!**