

Imagination, isolation and innocence

The romantic in Frankenstein

Frankenstein is often read as an early science-fiction novel or a sophisticated version of the popular and populist Gothic. Here Ray Cluley takes a different angle, foregrounding its connections with Romantic texts and concepts.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is well known to have been born of a ghost-story competition between friends, these friends including none other than Percy Shelley, Lord Byron and Dr John The Vampyre Polidori. It is recognised as a key Gothic text and acknowledged as one of the earliest examples of science-fiction, but like a lot of early 19th-century fiction it is also very much concerned with late Romantic interests and ideas.

Well-grounded in a realistic world, it explores the role of society and the individual and is a literary case study for the nature/nurture debate. Much of this is done in the Gothic tradition, such as using the epistolary form of Walton's letters to suggest authenticity. The Gothic shares so many Romantic concerns that it became common to distinguish between the two on grounds of readership; the Romantic was considered 'high' literature whereas the Gothic represented popular 'low' fiction, sensational in its use of the monstrous and macabre. As a result, the Romantic was often used as a way of justifying a text's worth. The three main influences of *Frankenstein* are made clear: its alternative title of *The Modern Prometheus* is typically Romantic in its use of classical myth, Milton's *Paradise Lost* is referred to at length, and similarities with Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* abound. Just as Romantic works sought to challenge the expectations of the reader, so does *Frankenstein* use the strange, unusual, and even grotesque to detail both the immediately familiar and the more abstract.

'Disturbed by the wildest dreams'

Dreams, a typical Romantic interest, are an important part of *Frankenstein*. In fact, whereas Percy Shelley, in his preface, tries to justify the work by highlighting its focus on science and its place in society, Mary Shelley was more concerned with the power of the imagination and the dream that inspired the tale:

When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me.

Interestingly, Shelley presents herself as the recipient of the story rather than the creator, as if she has been transported by the world of the imagination, almost as if swept up by forces beyond her control.

Victor is similarly driven, and whereas many texts would only offer observations of the waking world, the inclusion of Victor's dreams seems to grant an equal importance to experiences observed with closed eyes. His sleep is 'disturbed by the wildest dreams' and they prove to be prophetic. He dreams of Elizabeth: but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death.

After becoming a corpse, Elizabeth then transforms into Victor's deceased mother:

I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of flannel

and he wakes from this dream of death to a creature assembled from it. The creature

serves to link the death symbolism of the dream experience with the real world, especially considering his later murderous actions, merging the real and unreal within the fictional world.

Whilst dreams and death themselves are explored in the work of many Romantic writers, Frankenstein also links them to eroticism. Victor's dream begins with an embrace and a kiss, a kiss which represents the doomed wedding night inasmuch as it seems to cause her death, much as his intimacy with Elizabeth leads to her being a victim of revenge. There is also a suggestion of incest: Elizabeth, Victor's adopted sister, metamorphoses after the dream-kiss into his mother. Whilst Elizabeth and Victor are not related, there are enough references to her as a sister to suggest a sexual taboo here, especially considering her transformation into his mother, and this combines with the disturbing link between sex and death to present the protagonist as monstrous, despite his own view of himself as victim. These incestuous and necrophilic images also enter the reality of the novel's world, such as with the creature's request for a mate: if Victor were to create such a female it would be the creature's sister, and it is dead flesh that craves her. When you consider the parent-like link between Victor and his creation, it is clear that such incestuous and necrophilic ideas are foreshadowed when the creature threatens, 'I shall be with you on your wedding-night', an expression that is loaded with sexual innuendo. Unlike in other novels, this wedding does not conclude the story but rather propels it forward into a dramatic pursuit away from society, destabilising the conventional ending with a more open and troubling conclusion.

'I am alone, and miserable'

From the outset, as early as Walton's second letter, it is clear that isolation and solitude are to be main concerns of the novel. 'I have no friend', Walton complains, a sentiment that echoes throughout the novel. The use of three separate first-person narrators could be seen to heighten this, with each locked in his own way of seeing and sense of despair and separation from others.

Of course the overall story is Victor Frankenstein's, as the title of the novel suggests. As a scientist he may represent the rational and the threats of modernisation, but Victor also embodies the Romantic rebelliousness towards accepted modes of thought in his pursuit of forbidden knowledge, and this sets him apart from other men. Thus he is also a Romantic figure in his isolation. His endeavour to create life from death is often attributed as the cause for his neglect of family and friends at university, but he admits earlier than such experiments that 'two years passed ... during which I paid no visit to Geneva' and we are told it is his temper 'to avoid a crowd'. He goes on to spend his time alone in vaults and charnel houses with only the dead for companionship. 'In a solitary chamber ... separated from all the other apartments', Victor works in self-imposed isolation, an outsider by choice, and thus so very different from the creature of his making. Only when his studies are complete does he think of returning home, but then he is again distracted by a personal pursuit that

caused me also to forget those friends who ... I had not seen for so long

The contrast of Victor Frankenstein with the sociable Clerval highlights the potentially negative consequences of the isolated and obsessive Romantic figure.

Although Romantic in his rebellious creativity and isolation, Victor is obviously also

used by Shelley to explore man's capacity for reason and his attempts to use science as a means to control the natural world. Victor animates dead tissue and creates life without the biological aid of a mother, and rather than respond with care towards the 'child', he flees from the responsibility. Considering the love and support he himself received, this again sets Victor apart from others. His creation is abandoned, left to fend for itself, another isolated figure. The rational/scientific and the Romantic are placed both in opposition and in connection with each other in a way that raises all kinds of troubling questions. The juxtaposition of Romantic and scientific concerns is a feature of late Gothic and Romantic texts that Shelley develops with great inventiveness, using the one to explore the other.

'The awful and majestic in nature' and the innocent

Victor abandons his responsibilities and travels into the countryside where the serenity of the 'majestic' surroundings contrasts greatly with his troubled mind. These grand examples of the natural world, the mountains, the ravine, the glaciers, are again typical of Romantic focus and they serve to emphasise the unnatural pursuit of Victor in trying to 'penetrate the secrets of nature', plundering 'her hiding-places'. Though he is like many other scientists in this respect, he is the only one whose metaphorical rape of the natural world has resulted in an offspring in the literal sense.

The creature, however, is quite different. Both early and later Romantic writers placed great importance on the power of nature and were eager that people would live a simpler life; a life based more on sensations and emotions than technological advances. In Shelley's text, the creature's narrative embodies this, noting the wonders and beauties of nature without any scientific attempt to question or learn nature's secrets. When you consider that the period in which Mary Shelley lived was very concerned with natural innocence and child-like wonder, particularly influenced by the writings of Rousseau, there is certainly a great deal of sympathy for the creature. Though violent and vengeful, a childhood innocence influenced by events beyond its own control provides a particular pathos. A creature that is naturally benevolent and kind, driven to commit evil acts, combines violence with victimisation to make a more complex character that retains the vulnerability that is part of the Romantic tradition.

Shelley's 'hideous progeny'

There is a distinct lack of closure to *Frankenstein*: Walton's expedition is cancelled, Victor dies without coming to terms with his creation, and the creature floats away into the darkness and ice. This reluctance to offer a satisfactory conclusion may be at least partly due to a Romantic sensibility which favours openness and uncertainty over ultimate authority and certainty. To give it a tidy ending that resolves all tensions would be to diminish its power to make us think about the issues it raises. *Frankenstein* is a text of dreams, death, diabolical creation, and the relationships that exist between them. It is a text of isolations and oppositions: Victor's seclusion from society is his own choice whereas the creature's isolation is a forced one; Victor shuns companionship, the creature longs for it; one creates life, the other brings death and destruction. And yet a bond exists between the two, one so strong, in fact, that in our modern society the name 'Frankenstein' has come to represent them both. The characters blur into each other to create a novel that is as much a hybrid as the creature itself, a monstrous creation of multiple narrative voices and ideas that

are at once Gothic, science-fiction, and Romantic, a text that is more than the sum of its parts.

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