ANDREW SMITH

Introduction

Mary Shelley's account of the dream which inspired *Frankenstein* has become almost as well known as the novel itself. She recounts that after days of being unable to conjure a tale in the wake of the infamous ghost story contest at the Villa Diodati in the summer of 1816, she went to bed after listening to Byron and Shelley discussing some fashionable, and at the time scientifically respectable, ideas about how life might be animated from dead matter:

> . . . we retired to rest. 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, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. 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.[1]

Shelley's self-reflexive 1831 account of her genesis of the 1818 novel locates *Frankenstein* within a highly ambivalent model of Romantic authorship. If we are to take her retrospective account of 1816 at face value then we should note that her 1831 Introduction indicates an anxiety about creativity which is echoed in Victor Frankenstein's plight as he too struggles with the creation of 'the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life' (p. 196). As the 'pale student' becomes hunted and haunted by his creation so Mary claims that she was, try as she might, unable to cast of the power of this dream, 'I could not . . . easily get rid of my hideous phantom; still it haunted me' despite her attempts to return to 'my tiresome, unlucky ghost story!' (p. 196), that she had been working on. The tale therefore seems to be the product of a cursed imagination that becomes reflected in Victor's ambivalent attitude towards

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316091203.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

his creation. For Mary the dream provides both a troubling inspiration and an antidote to 'that blank incapacity of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull nothing replies to our anxious invocations' (p. 195). Mary was under pressure after an evening in which Byron, his physician Dr John Polidori, Percy Shelley, Mary and her stepsister Claire Clairmont (who was also Byron's pregnant mistress) had spent an evening reading aloud from J. B. Eyriès's *Fantasmagoriana*, a French translation of German Gothic tales. This recital led Byron to propose that '"We will each write a ghost story"' (p. 194). Mary, the daughter of two well-known radical authors, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, was clearly conscious of the cumulative pressure on her to succeed as a writer. Indeed she notes that Percy was eager to test whether the 18-year-old Mary might have a hidden capability for authorship. Mary records:

> He was forever inciting me to obtain literary reputation, which even on my own part I cared for then, though since I have become infinitely indifferent to it. At this time he desired that I should write, not so much with the idea that I could produce any thing worthy of notice, but, that he might himself judge how far I possessed the promise of better things hereafter. (p. 193)

It is therefore clear that Mary felt subject to considerable scrutiny at this time and the ghost story writing competition added to this pressure with her noting that in subsequent days she was asked '"Have you thought of a story?" ... and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative' (p. 195). Until she has her dream.

This sketch of the origins of *Frankenstein* indicates how ideas about creativity shaped the genesis of the novel which in turn dwells on the dangers of creativity. Romanticism, broadly defined, emphasized the importance of the creative imagination which had links to a model of freedom that was both artistic and political. This emphasis on the freedom to think and the freedom to imagine the world differently can, in part, be explained by Mary Shelley's family background and more broadly by the wider political dramas of the age.

Mary Godwin (as she was before her marriage to Percy Shelley) was born on 30 August 1797 to Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. Mary Wollstonecraft was a pioneering radical feminist and the author of the seminal *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) which attributed gender inequality to the different forms of education received by boys and girls (an issue also addressed in *Frankenstein*), and she was the author of important works of political philosophy and fiction.[2] Mary Godwin's father was William Godwin, the radical political philosopher and novelist. His

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316091203.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (1793) examines the sources of social and economic inequality that are also explored through the theme of injustice in *Frankenstein*. Godwin sought to popularize his ideas by writing a Gothic novel, *Caleb Williams* (1794), which further addressed ideas about injustice and inequality. In Godwin's novel the central tensions between Caleb and his employer, Falkland, would become echoed in the relationship between Victor and his creature in Mary's novel – and Godwin's influence on her is indicated in *Frankenstein*'s dedication to him. Mary Wollstonecraft's influence was less direct (although no less important) as she died 11 days after Mary was born due to complications with the birth. William Godwin subsequently married his neighbour, Mary Jane Clairmont, in 1801 which was not a particularly happy experience for Mary Godwin. Mary Godwin probably first met Percy Shelley (who was estranged from his wife Harriet, who would commit suicide in December 1816) in 1812 and again in May 1814 and eloped with him to Europe in July of that year, which resulted in her first publication *History of a Six Weeks' Tour through a part of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland; with Letters Descriptive of a Sail Round the Lake of Geneva and of the Glaciers of Chamouni* (1817).[3]

Mary and Percy married in December 1816 (after Harriet's death). They had a son, William, born in January 1816 and a daughter, Clara, born in September 1817. In February 1815 a prematurely born daughter had died and the trauma of this is often cited as an influence on the desire to raise the dead (as Victor gives 'birth' to the creature) in *Frankenstein*. Further tragedy struck when Clara died in 1818 and William in 1819. A son, Percy, was born in November 1819 (who lived into adulthood and died in 1889). The poet Percy Shelley died in a boating accident in 1822 and Byron died in 1824. Dr John Polidori, author of 'The Vampyre: A Tale' (1819), died in 1821. Mary Shelley would write six more novels and in 1839 provided the prefatory comments to a four-volume edition of Percy Shelley's poems, as well as another travelogue, *Rambles in Germany and Italy* (1844).[4] She died on 1 February 1851 of a suspected brain tumour.

This brief biography indicates both her extraordinary radical connections and the rather tragic life that she led from her mid 20s onwards which is characterized by the deaths of those she was closest to. Death may seem to be a dominant theme in *Frankenstein* and certainly from the vantage point of 1831 Mary reflects, in her new Introduction to the novel, on both the inspiration for *Frankenstein* and her encounters with figures (most notably Percy Shelley and Byron), who have now died. It should be noted that the focus in this volume is on the 1818 edition which is read as a product of

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316091203.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

its time.[5] Many of the contributors also discuss the significance of these amendments as in several respects they represent a shift in political vision. Indeed what type of politics are involved when reading *Frankenstein* has been a concern for critics who have often been struck by the extraordinary ambivalence which the novel appears to express towards radical thought. In order to appreciate this we also need to understand the period in which the text was written.

This Introduction began by suggesting that Mary's account of the inspiration behind the novel comes out of an ambivalent attitude towards Romantic creativity. More broadly we might say that the novel as a whole represents an ambivalence towards the Romantic project and the type of artistic and political idealism with which Romanticism was associated. Victor Frankenstein should be seen as a thwarted idealist who searches for a way of overcoming death, only to create a creature that kills. He also emphasizes that he had selected the creature's 'features as beautiful' but creates monstrosity (p. 39). In other words the idealism generates the very thing that it is meant to overcome. This is a theme which recurs repeatedly in the novel in references to paradise in which Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674) plays a crucial role in emphasizing that all of the principal protagonists (Victor, Robert Walton and the creature) inhabit a post-lapsarian and dystopian world. The question is why would someone with such ostensibly radical connections (and therefore credentials) as Mary Shelley want to emphasize the failure of idealism? It is tempting to attribute much of this to the post-Napoleonic Europe in which the novel is set. The defeat of Napoleon in 1815 effectively marked the end of the French Revolutionary politics that had been, initially, much admired by both of Mary's parents and the Romantic poets. In the end political idealism had not transformed the world and a figure such as Byron would need to find his causes elsewhere in Europe (in his case in support of Greek independence against the Ottoman Empire). However, to impose such a reading on the novel is to lose sight of the fact that its elegiac tone can be interpreted as a radical lament for this lost idealism – a theme which is addressed in her novel *The Last Man* (1826) which focuses on the last man left alive after a plague has devastated the world (a novel which includes thinly veiled portraits of the now deceased Percy Shelley and Byron).

The ambivalence in the novel can in part be attributed to this complex response towards Romantic idealism in which Victor's narrative might seem to function as a precautionary warning to Robert Walton about the dangers of surrendering to the egotism which appears to tarnish idealism. On his deathbed, however, Victor says to Walton:

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316091203.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> 'Farewell, Walton! Seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed.' (p. 186)

Failure may only be temporary and this suggests the possible future resurrection of Romantic idealism and the radical politics with which it was associated. This is an issue that I will touch upon further in Chapter 5 in a discussion of the scientific contexts of the novel.

It is also important to acknowledge that what we are looking at is a Gothic novel and, as David Punter has argued, the Gothic is a form which is founded upon ambivalence.[6] In a novel like *Frankenstein* we witness not just ambivalence about Romanticism but also an undermining of any clearly defined concept of 'evil'. The key question is whether Victor is responsible for the creature's killings, because they are a consequence of his abandonment of the creature. If we agree, then it is still difficult to ascribe 'evil' to Victor's negligence. The creature might seem to be the more obvious 'monster' in the text, but his violent actions can be attributed to a reaction to the injustice to which he has been repeatedly subjected. The novel, in its psychological intensity, looks back towards *Caleb Williams* and anticipates Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), which gives full treatment to the type of divided self and psychological projections which are implicit in the relationship between Victor and his creature. *Frankenstein* also represents the end of the first golden heyday of the Gothic which was broadly between 1780 and 1820, a period dominated by social, economic and political change, the upheavals of which were, at different levels of explicitness, explored by writers of the Gothic at the time. The Gothic from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries can be read as responding to the revolutionary turmoil in Europe during this period, whereas later nineteenth-century Gothic narratives (as in the writing of Stevenson, Stoker and H. G. Wells, for example), engaged with issues of science, technology and urbanization. Throughout the nineteenth century the ambivalent attitude towards the French Revolution is effectively supplanted by concerns about the consequences of the Industrial Revolution and the technocratic changes with which it was associated.

There are also differences within the period between the 1818 edition and the 1831 version which are important for us to consider and consequently many of the chapters in this study address them. However, the 1831 edition is not the second edition of the novel and it is important to note that the novel was republished in 1823 following the popular success of Richard

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316091203.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Brinsley Peake's stage adaptation earlier that year. The 1823 edition incorporated a number of changes which were made by William Godwin as he helped to prepare the novel for republication. It was this 1823 edition that Mary subsequently revised in 1831 and it therefore includes Godwin's amendments.

The history of these editorial changes is discussed in the first section of this volume which addresses the 'Historical and Literary Contexts' of the novel and provides an important discussion of the range of different contexts which we need to consider when trying to relate *Frankenstein* to the culture that produced it. Charles E. Robinson in a chapter on '*Frankenstein*: Its Composition and Publication' explores the important differences between the 1818, 1823 and 1831 editions as well as outlining the novel's critical reception, circulation and readership. In 'Contextualizing Sources' Lisa Vargo explores the literary and non-literary textual sources cited in *Frankenstein*. To that end she examines, amongst other texts, how Volney's *Ruin of Empires* (1791), Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (c. 120), Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674), Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) and Godwin's novels and political writings were reworked by Mary to shape the main themes of her novel. Vargo also outlines how scientific ideas of the period were explored, a theme which is given more sustained treatment later in this section. Jerrold E. Hogle in 'Romantic Contexts' examines *Frankenstein*'s place within a Romantic literary culture defined by Mary's contemporaries such as Percy Shelley and Byron, but also earlier Romantics such as Wordsworth and Coleridge. Hogle also explores the important influence of Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782) which shaped Romantic models of autobiography that *Frankenstein* is also indebted to. The emphasis in some of these early chapters is on the influence of poetry over Mary's novel, but Catherine Lanone in 'The Context of the Novel' examines the culture of the novel that generated *Frankenstein* and the influence that the novel had on subsequent novelists in the nineteenth century. She explores *Frankenstein*'s indebtedness to *Caleb Williams* and its role in shaping a language of psychology, male authority and monstrosity in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). She also examines how the psychological tensions in *Frankenstein* were developed in Wilkie Collins's *Basil* (1852) which also focuses on psychological strains and images of physical deformity which owes much to Mary's novel. Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861) makes a direct allusion to *Frankenstein* when Pip likens himself to a creature that has been made by others, such as Magwich, which also introduces a theme of injustice that is addressed by Dickens. In the following chapter on 'Scientific Contexts' I explore how the novel draws upon the work of the chemist, Sir Humphry Davy, for its model of the scientist as

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316091203.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

an heroic Romantic adventurer. The chapter also explores how the writings of Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin's grandfather, influenced the novel. *Frankenstein* is also discussed in relation to contemporary debates about galvanism and some of the scientific controversies of the time. Science during this period has a clear political dimension to it as its discoveries seemed to be ungodly to many (and Victor appears to usurp the role of God in creating life), and suggested a link between scientific and political revolutions. In the following chapter Adriana Craciun argues that *Frankenstein* can not only be related to a number of contemporary political contexts, it can also be read as producing a particular type of political vision. The novel can be read as a critique of the polar explorations that became popular at the time – explorations which seemed to provide an alternative outlet for masculine adventure that had until recently been consumed by the Napoleonic wars. However, it is Safie's narrative which, whilst seemingly working within a conventional orientalist account about Turkey, indicates that a discourse of rebellion and political radicalism has not been defeated in a post-Napoleonic Europe but rather reappears within a gendered narrative which asserts the continuing need for emancipation.

The second section of this book focuses on 'Theories and Forms' and explores how a number of theoretical viewpoints can be productively applied to the novel. The first chapter in this section, by Angela Wright, on 'The Female Gothic', explores how the model of the female Gothic novel, which has been associated with the popular late eighteenth century writings of Ann Radcliffe, shaped *Frankenstein*. The 1831 Introduction, which emphasizes the subtlety of 'Terror' (as something implicit) over 'Horror' (as represented by sustained explicit violence), demonstrates that Mary was self-consciously reflecting on Radcliffe's posthumously published essay 'The Supernatural in Poetry' (1826) (in which Radcliffe discriminated between 'Terror' and 'Horror'), and so seeking to align the 1831 edition of the novel with a Radcliffean vision – an alignment which is made clear in the treatment of Safie and the resistance to power that she represents. How the novel can be read via queer theory is explored in the following chapter by George E. Haggerty. The fraught relationship between Victor and his creature and their feverish bonding can be helpfully explained by the application of queer theory which explores how the novel articulates a covert homosocial narrative which aligns it with queer politics. Patrick Brantlinger in the following chapter on 'Race and *Frankenstein*' explores how the creature's 'otherness' (his apparent 'monstrosity'), can be read in relation to racial categories in the period. The novel also makes repeated references to slavery which can also be read within the context of race. The battle between Victor and his creature is ultimately one about mastery and this conflict can be read

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316091203.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

through the racial tensions of the time. In '*Frankenstein* and Ecocriticism' Timothy Morton explores how *Frankenstein* raises a number of questions about what we mean by nature. The creature is both seemingly 'natural' (a subject with recognizable thoughts and feelings) and completely 'unnatural' (constructed by science). Morton explores how the novel challenges the idea of nature as something which we can either possess or belong to and his chapter provides a counterpoint to Romantic conceptions of nature which had suggested that it conceals a hidden metaphysical truth, one that the knowing subject can read and so decode. Morton's ecocritical approach suggests that a more complex model of reading nature in *Frankenstein* helps us to understand why so many of the protagonists are in search of an idea of belonging to nature. The issue of the creature's construction is explored further by Andy Mousley in a chapter on 'The Posthuman' which examines in depth how the novel addresses what we mean by the 'human' and whether the construction of the creature points towards an emerging culture of the posthuman which is implicated in the novel's repeated questioning of what being a person might mean. The theoretical approaches in this section thus provide new and challenging ways in which we might read the novel and they also demonstrate how *Frankenstein*'s representational complexity can be helpfully made sense of by contemporary theory.

The final section on 'Adaptations' explores how *Frankenstein* has gained a cultural life that transcends the form of the novel and the period which produced it. Diane Long Hoeveler explores the numerous stage productions of the play throughout the nineteenth century and discusses their variations to the original novel as well as relating them more widely to the theatrical culture of the period. In the following chapter Mark Jancovich outlines the film (and television) history of *Frankenstein* from the Edison Studio 1910 adaptation to the present day. He explores how these films reflect changes in the history of film production and examines the various ways that films reworked the original tale and earlier theatrical and film versions of it. The novel also gained an afterlife in science fiction and other horror writings of the twentieth century and David Punter examines their significance in a chapter which discusses, amongst others, Brian Aldiss's *Frankenstein Unbound* (1973), and Dean Koontz's series of five co-authored novels on *Frankenstein* from *Prodigal Son* (2004) to *The Dead Town* (2011). In '*Frankenstein* in Comics and Graphic Novels' Christopher Murray explores how early comics drew upon the 1930s films for their aesthetic inspiration. Later comics worked at adapting Mary's novel, until in the 1990s we witness the emergence of the graphic novel which exists alongside, rather than replaces, a continuingly evolving culture of *Frankenstein* comics. Murray relates these adaptations to the comic industry which produced them and

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316091203.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

explores how these comics reflected some of the political concerns of their day. The final chapter by Karen Coats and Farran Norris Sands explores how *Frankenstein* has been adapted for young readers, which includes the picture book market aimed at young children consisting of texts such as *Frankenstein Makes a Sandwich* (2006) to young adult novels including Mackenzi Lee's *This Monstrous Thing* (2015). The chapter discusses how *Frankenstein* seems an appropriate text to rewrite for this younger market because at one level the original novel explores the creature's anxiety about growing up. These types of growing pains and the types of family tensions within which they may take place thus rework *Frankenstein*'s concern about childhood, parenthood and what is expected of adult life.

The continuing popularity of *Frankenstein* is clear from its many adaptations, adaptations which provide ways of reading the novel. Nick Dear's popular theatrical production (directed by Danny Boyle in 2011), for example, switched the actors playing Victor Frankenstein and the creature (Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller) on alternate nights which emphasized the doubling that is implicit to the novel. In addition, Liam Scarlett's ballet of *Frankenstein*, which premiered at the Royal Opera House in May 2016, bears witness to the ever evolving form of Mary Shelley's tale.

This volume consists of chapters which are all written by experts in their field which explore how *Frankenstein* can be related to the period which produced it, to contemporary critical theories which bear testimony to its representational complexity, and to the novel's adaptations, which indicates just how deeply *Frankenstein* has penetrated the culture. This book is both a guide to the novel and an act of cultural analysis which is a starting point for students wishing to explore the novel further. At the end there is a Guide to Further Reading which relates to the sections of this book and which outlines ways in which further lines of enquiry can be pursued.

NOTES

1 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. and Intro., Marilyn Butler (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 196. Future references will be made parenthetically.

2 See also her *Vindications of the Rights of Men* (1790) where she critiques Edmund Burke's view of the French Revolution and novels such as *Mary: A Fiction* (1788) and the unfinished posthumously published novel *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798).

3 Mary Wollstonecraft had also written a travelogue, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796).

4 Her other novels were *Valperga* (1823), *The Last Man* (1826), *Perkin Warbeck* (1830), *Lodore* (1835), *Falkner* (1837). *Matilda* was completed in 1819, but the theme of incest meant that it was not published until 1959. She also edited Percy Shelley's *Posthumous Poems* in 1824.

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316091203.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

5 The 1831 edition contains amendments which are republished in the appendices of the 1818 text edited by Marilyn Butler. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. and Intro., Marilyn Butler (Oxford University Press, 1998), see Appendix B, pp. 198–228.
6 See David Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, 2 vols. (London and New York: Longman, 1996), Vol. II, pp. 181–216 on 'Mutations of terror: theory and the Gothic'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316091203.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press