



# Frankenstein

A Modern Prometheus

# Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus

Mary Shelley subtitled her novel "The Modern Prometheus." According to the Greeks, Prometheus, a Titan who preceded the Olympian Gods, created Man from clay. Zeus demanded food offerings from Man, but Prometheus taught them how to trick Zeus into accepting the less useful parts of a butchered animal so that Man could keep the best parts for themselves. Once Zeus learned of the deception he decreed that Man was not to be allowed fire. Prometheus crept into the underworld, stole fire from Hephaestus, and gave it to Man. Again, Zeus discovered the transgression and chained Prometheus to a rock, where an eagle would devour his liver every day (it would grow back every night). He remained there for 30,000 years.



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In order to punish Man, Zeus and the Olympians created Woman. A beautiful creature, Pandora was offered as a gift and readily accepted by Man. As a "wedding present," Zeus presented them with a beautifully wrought box. When Pandora opened the box, all suffering and despair was unleashed upon mankind. Zeus had his revenge.

Prometheus sought fire for human betterment -- to make tools and warm hearts -- but inadvertently brought about destruction. Similarly, Mary Shelley's arrogant scientist, Victor Frankenstein, claims "benevolent intentions, and thirst[s] for the moment when I should put them in practice." Frankenstein endures not only because of its infamous horrors but for the richness of the ideas it asks us to confront--human accountability, social alienation, and the nature of life itself.

The Prometheus Myth has become a *metaphor* of what happens when humans get a hold of something they cannot control and reach beyond their ability.

# Mary Shelley

- ❖ Born in 1797 to William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft
- ❖ Her mother died shortly after Mary was born
- ❖ Shelley learned about her mother only through writings her mother left behind, including *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) which advocated that women should have the same educational opportunities as rights in society as men.
- ❖ Avid reader and scholar and knew through her father some of the most important men of the time (William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge)
- ❖ Married Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1816 and listened intently to his intellectual conversations with others.
  - ❖ Scandal! He abandoned his pregnant wife for the 16 year old



Beware;  
I am fearless, and  
therefore powerful.

-Mary Shelley

# Inspiration

On a visit in Switzerland with PBS to Lord Byron, she was challenged to write a story. She had heard Byron and Shelley discussing “the nature of the principle of life and whether there was any chance of its ever being discovered.” From this conversation, she had the “waking dream” which eventually became the novel *Frankenstein*.

# Historical Context

- ❖ It is set in the latter part of the 18th century, at the end of the Enlightenment and the beginning of the Romantic period.
- ❖ It critiques the excesses of the Enlightenment and introduces the beliefs of the Romantics.
  - ❖ Reflects a shift in social and political thought
    - ❖ From the view of humans as creatures who use science and reason to shape and control their destiny to humans as creatures who rely on their emotions to determine what is right.

# Ideas of the Enlightenment

- ✿ Scientific observation of the outer world
- ✿ Logic and reason; science and technology
- ✿ Believed in following standards and traditions
- ✿ Appreciated elegance and refinement
- ✿ Interested in maintaining the aristocracy
- ✿ Sought to follow and validate authority
- ✿ Favored a social hierarchy
- ✿ Nature should be controlled by humans

# Important Revolutions

- ❖ American and French Revolution
  - ❖ Calls for individual freedom and an overthrow of rigid social hierarchy
- ❖ Industrial Revolution
  - ❖ Social system challenged by change from agricultural society to industrial one with a large, impoverished and restless working class

# Ideas of the Romantic Period

- ❖ Emphasis on imagination and emotion, individual passion and inspiration
- ❖ Rejection of formal, upper class works
- ❖ Belief in individual liberty; rebellious attitude against tyranny
- ❖ Fascination with nature; perception of nature as transformative
- ❖ Concerned with common people
- ❖ Favored democracy
- ❖ Desired radical change
- ❖ Nature should be untamed

# Style: Gothic Novel

- ❖ *Frankenstein* is generally categorized as a Gothic novel:
  - ❖ a genre of fiction that uses gloomy settings and supernatural events to create an atmosphere of mystery and terror.
- ❖ Shelley adds to her development of the plot the use of psychological realism:
  - ❖ Delving into the psyches of the characters in and attempt to explain why they react as they do and what drives them to make their decisions.

# Major Characters

## **Victor Frankenstein**

- ❖ Protagonist, product of an idealistic Enlightenment education; fueled by possibilities of science and a desire for acclaim; becomes obsessed with creating life from spare body parts. Rational demeanor dissolves and by story's end, consumed by primitive emotions of fear and hatred.

# Major Characters

## **The Creature**

- ❖ Never named; is Victor's doppelgänger (alter ego); Creature rationally analyzes the society that rejects him; sympathetic character, admires people and wants to be a part of human society; only results in violence when he is repeatedly rejected

# Major Characters

## ❖ **Henry Clerval**

- ❖ Victor's childhood friend; true romantic, wants to leave mark on the world, but never loses sight of "the moral relations of things:

## ❖ **Elizabeth Lavenza**

- ❖ adopted as an infant by Victor's family; marries Victor

## ❖ **Robert Walton**

- ❖ Arctic explorer who's obsessed with gaining knowledge and fame; rescues Victor in the Arctic; tells the story

# Allusions to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

- ❖ *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem, published in 1667. Milton was a strong influence on Shelley's writing.
- ❖ *Paradise Lost* retells the story of the "fall of man" – in which Adam & Eve eat the forbidden fruit from the Garden of Eden after being tempted by Satan.
- ❖ *Paradise Lost* is also important because this is the first book the monster reads – thus shaping his view of society, and humanity as a whole.

# Themes

- ❖ Consequences of irresponsibility in the pursuit of knowledge
- ❖ Consequences of pride
- ❖ Consequences of society's rejection of someone who is unattractive
- ❖ Destructive power of revenge
- ❖ Parent-child conflicts
- ❖ Sympathy