
ANG1750

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

WEEK 2

- ▶ Frankenstein

Winter 2021

Prof. Michael E. Sinatra

LITERARY ASSIGNMENTS

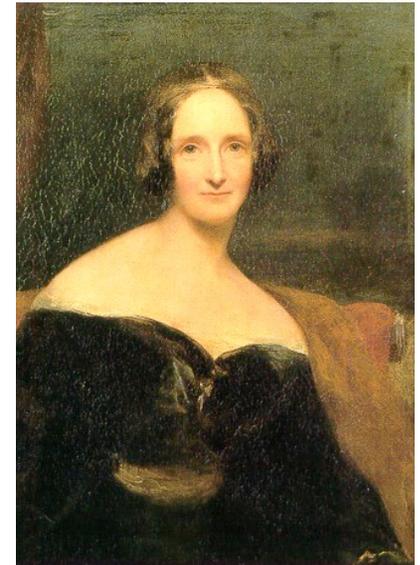
- ▶ Literary assignment #1: Frankenstein and Neuromancer (22 February)
- ▶ Literary assignment #2: Watchmen and Redshirts (29 March)
- ▶ Literary assignment #3: The Testament and Titan (26 April)
- ▶ **2 questions** emailed to you via Studium @ 4pm
- ▶ you choose **1 question** and submit by noon the following day your 600-800 words answer

EXAMPLES

- ▶ Question 1:
 - ▶ Discuss the issue of narrative perspective for your understanding of Frankenstein.
- ▶ Question 2:
 - ▶ Contrast the (in)humanity of Dr. Manhattan and Ozymandias, with at least 2 examples from Watchmen.

MARY SHELLEY

- ▶ 1797-1851
- ▶ Daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin
- ▶ Wife of P. B. Shelley
- ▶ Author of numerous short-stories, seven novels, and some non-fictional prose (including her Rambles in Germany and Italy in 1840, 1842, and 1843)



“Frankenstein is a novel about itself and about its author’s relation to it. At its heart lies Mary Shelley’s individual struggle with the act of creation, a struggle characterized by fear as much as by ambition.”

(Paula R. Feldman, ‘The Psychological Mystery of Frankenstein’ [1990] p. 71)

“[Shelley’s] mixed feelings, both assertive and guilty, of the adolescent for whom fully adult identity means both motherhood and (in her circle) authorship too.”

(Chris Baldick, In Frankenstein’s Shadow [1987] p. 32)

“My husband ... was from the very first, very anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage, and enrol myself on the page of fame. He was for ever inciting me to obtain literary reputation.”

(Introduction to the 1831 edition)

What is not named in the text acquires an identity through the confused misinterpretation of the novel by the reader.

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mould me man? Did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?

(Milton, Paradise Lost, X.743-5)

Shelley’s work develops certain Miltonic themes further, and acts as a replacement of Paradise Lost and of the Prometheus myth as encountered in Hesiod and Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound. The result is Shelley’s re-writing the myths of the creation of man as Frankenstein and re-writing the myths of man’s subsequent extinction in her 1826 novel The Last Man.

“the presence of the novel’s self-consciously male texts ... illuminate the absences they cover, to expose the self-contradictions they repress.”

(Bette London, ‘Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, and the Spectacle of Masculinity’, PMLA, 108.2 (1993) 260)

... anxious to prevent your continuing in the mistake of supposing Mr Shelley guilty of a juvenile attempt of mine; to which – from its being written at an early age, I abstained from putting my name – and from respect to those persons from whom I bear it. I have therefore kept it concealed except from a few friends.

(The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley vol. I, p. 71)

Frankenstein is an open-ended series of dialogues between present and absent characters, between active male and passive female characters, and between science fact and science fiction. The re-telling of Victor Frankenstein's tale by Robert Walton to his sister Margaret Walton Saville in a series of letters places Victor's story within a narrative frame.

"[Margaret] fails to get into action—into the plot or into Robert's adult life—not because True Womanhood binds her to the home or even to vitiating concepts, but because Promethean men are incorrigible. Robert would not heed her before he left, and he will listen still less upon a return which proves her right all along."

(William Veeder, Mary Shelley & Frankenstein [1986] p. 215)

"The endeavor of Frankenstein to first create life on his own and then prevent his monster from mating suggests, if only by default, a homoerotic tension which underlies the incestuous bond. ... His creation of "a being like myself" hints at both masturbatory and homosexual desires which the scientist attempts to sanctify with the reproduction of another being."

(Judith Halberstam, Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters [1995] p. 42)

"For some time I was lost in conjecture as to the cause of [your unhappiness]; but yesterday an idea struck me, and if it is well founded, I conjure you to avow it. Reserve on such a point would not only be useless, but draw down treble misery on us all."
(Shelley, p. 103)

"you may have met with another whom you may love; and considering yourself as bound in honour to your cousin, this struggle may occasion the poignant misery which you appear to feel." (Shelley, p. 104)

“Answer me, I conjure you, by our mutual happiness, with simple truth—do you not love another?” (Shelley, p. 130)

“This is in fact the case, for the demon, the creation of Frankenstein’s imagination, resembles in many ways the romantic object of desire, the beloved invented to replace, in a less threatening form, the powerful mother who must be killed.”

(Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing* [1986] p. 104)

“Answer me, I conjure you, by our mutual happiness, with simple truth—do you not love **as you would wish to love a wife** another?” (Shelley, p. 130)

“the compulsive character of masculine science.”

(Brian Easlea, *Fathering the Unthinkable: Masculinity, Science and the Nuclear Arms Race* [1983] p. 35)

““[Shelley] appeals to scientific evidence for the veracity of her tale.”

(Brian Aldiss, *The Detached Retina: Aspects of SF and Fantasy* [1995] p. 78.)

“En retrait” means both retracted, that is, taken out of the narrative, and re-traced, or re-inscribed within the narrative. In other words, Shelley integrates the scientific dimension of her novel within the text by simultaneously eliminating traces of science and re-tracing these elements in the sub-text of the main narrative.

Writing science in *Frankenstein* thus becomes an act of denial, resulting in a meaningful silence. As opposed to the genesis of the universe as told in the *Bible*, where the Word is the beginning of all creation, Shelley literally unspeaks the birth of the Creature. The absence of description frustrates all male attempts at emulating natural birth, attempts which cannot but end in destructive chaos and annihilation.

“I busied myself to think of a story which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror... one to make the reader afraid to look around, to curdle the blood and quicken the beating heart.”

(Introduction to the 1831 edition)

“O! if I could only contrive one [ghost story] which could frighten my reader as I myself had been frightened that night! Swift as light and as cheering was the idea that broke in upon me. 'I have found it! What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow.’”

(Introduction to the 1831 edition)

“It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of life into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.” (Shelley, p. 34)

“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 uneasy, half-vital motion.”

(Introduction to the 1831 edition)

SOME GENERAL POINTS

- ▶ Structural construction (story within story; narrative voices; doppelganger trope; epistolary genre; editorial [re]construction);
- ▶ Framing reference (Milton's Paradise Lost);
- ▶ Gender elements (women in Frankenstein; homosocial environment [Clerval, Walton, sailors, "solitary occupation"]).
- ▶ Family value and parenting skills (Frankenstein, Elizabeth, and Justine; Walton and his sister; the De Laceys);

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- ▶ Moral value (science as sacrilegious);
 - ▶ Travel writing (languages);
 - ▶ Theories of education (moral responsibilities, Rousseau and Locke);
 - ▶ Political community (Frankenstein's upper class background; Walton's self-taught mobile middle-class background; Creature as lower-class mob / fear of the revolution);
 - ▶ Scientific elements (science [anatomy and electricity], and exploration).

“A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs.” (Shelley, p. 36)

STAR TREK THE NEXT GENERATION

Picard to Moriarty: “Even if I had reason to believe that would be successful, I don’t think that I could sanction it. Please understand, Professor, that you are in essence a new life form. One that we didn’t intend to create and that we don’t fully understand. Now **the moral and ethical implications** of deliberately creating another one like you are overwhelming.” (“Ship in a Bottle”)