

# Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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**English Honours, Semester II**

**C4T: British Romantic Literature - Novel**



# *Frankenstein* and the Theme of Monstrosity

- The figure of the ‘monster’ has been described by Foucault as the “unclassifiable”. It is an entity that embodies “all kinds of morphological abnormalities”:

“From the middle ages to the eighteenth century [...] the monster is essentially a mixture. It is a mixture of two kingdoms, the animal and the human: the man with the head of an ox, the man with bird’s feet – monsters. It is the blending, the mixture of two species: the pig with a sheep’s head is a monster. It is the mixture of two individuals, the one who has two heads and one body, or two bodies and one head is a monster. It is the mixture of two sexes: the one who is both male and female is a monster. It is a mixture of life and death: the foetus born with a morphology such that it cannot live, but which however manages to live for a few minutes or days, is a monster. Finally, it is a mixture of forms: the person who has no arms or legs, like a snake, is a monster. Consequently, the transgression of natural limits, the transgression of classification, of the table, transgression of the law as a table: this is the real question of monstrosity.” (as cited in Wright, 2013)



# *Frankenstein* and the Theme of Monstrosity

- According to Dana Bizuleanu, “the myth of the monster has been constantly reformulated over centuries, especially due to causes leading to the emergence and perception of what is monstrous.”
- It is the monster Frankenstein, the creation of the scientist Victor Frankenstein in the novel, who makes us wonder whether this literary text should be categorized as a ‘Gothic’ narrative, a moral tale, or a science fiction. Some critics believe that *Frankenstein* is a ‘bildungsroman’ or a novel of education that records the growth of the monster’s mind and shows its transition from the realm of nature to that of culture.



# *Frankenstein* and the Theme of Monstrosity

- In Victor Frankenstein’s opinion, the monster is intended to become a living thing or “one of simpler organisation,” so there is no trace of the idea in the novel that the monster could be a man in principle but a “being” like Victor himself supposes. Doctor Frankenstein identically relays to the reader that the monster is similar to an “animal”. The monster also represents a kind of a machine that should be created from some specific “materials”.
- However, the monster’s rejection of cannibalism in order to survive and his adoption of vegetarianism subverts the conventions of monstrosity and leads critics to question the bases of its existence. According to Jackson Petsche, “The fact that Victor Frankenstein’s creation, the ostensibly frightening ‘monster’, refuses to ‘destroy’ nonhuman animals for sustenance calls into question the very destructive habits of a meat-eating society.”



# *Frankenstein*: Monstrosity and the Sublime

- It is this rejection of carnivorousness that explains his need for alienation and the speciesist treatment of nonhuman animals thus poses a “challenge to the human-animal binary that underscores human-animal relations to begin with.”
- *Frankenstein* is visualized as a representation of the Gothic sublime that plays out the theme of “man makes man”. In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley’s hubristic creator, Victor Frankenstein is attributed Kantian sublimity and his elevated stature is indicated in the words of Captain Robert Walton, the arctic explorer and the narrator:

*“Even broken in spirit as he is, no one can feel more deeply than he does the beauties of nature. The starry sky, the sea, and every sight afforded by these wonderful [arctic] regions, seems still to have the power of elevating his soul from earth. Such a man has a double existence: he may suffer misery, and be overwhelmed by disappointments; yet, when he has retired into himself, he will be like a celestial spirit, that has a halo around him, within whose circle no grief or folly ventures.”*



# *Frankenstein: Monstrosity and the Sublime*

- Frankenstein's 'double existence' here, according to Walton, has to do with his ability to raise himself above the material body of nature into the transcendent and 'celestial' realm of mind.
- Yet, as Barbara Freeman points out, 'Each depiction of a sublime landscape [in *Frankenstein*] is linked to the Monster's appearance':  
*"I suddenly beheld the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing towards me with superhuman speed. He bounded over the crevices in the ice, among which I had walked with caution; his stature, also, as he approached, seemed to exceed that of a man. I was troubled: a mist came over my eyes, and I felt a faintness seize me . . . I perceived, as the shape came nearer, (sight / tremendous and abhorred!) that it was the wretch whom I had created."*
- Victor's ascent to sublimity thus stands defeated as the body *returns with a vengeance to confront him all over again*: and returns, specifically, in the shape of the monster.



# Questions

1. Critically analyze the element of the Gothic sublime as depicted in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

or

Comment on the use of Gothicism in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*.

2. Discuss the theme of monstrosity as symbolized by Victor Frankenstein's creation in Mary Shelley's novel.



# Recommended Readings

1. *Steve Vine. Mary Shelley's Sublime Bodies: Frankenstein, Matilda, The Last Man. English: Journal of the English Association. Volume 55 Issue 212. pp.141–156. 2006.*
2. *Bc. Žaneta Skalošová. Monster and Monstrosity in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Masaryk University. 2015.*
3. *Chen Yue-ting. Frankenstein and the Gothic Sublime. Journal of Literature and Art Studies. Vol. 8, No. 2. pp. 249-256. February 2018.*





# Recommended Readings

4. *Hannah Jackson. Creating a Monster: Attachment Theory and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English. Volume 20 Issue 1. 2018.*
5. *Courtney Huff-Oelberg. The Culture of the Body: The Beautiful, Sublime, and Ugly in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Clemson University. 2018.*



# Important Instructions

- I am aware that many of you were unable to procure the text of the novel before the lockdown. If you need the full text of the novel in the e-book format, send me a request at [ppmondal@narajolerajcollege.ac.in](mailto:ppmondal@narajolerajcollege.ac.in)
- You can also write to me at [ppmondal@narajolerajcollege.ac.in](mailto:ppmondal@narajolerajcollege.ac.in) for seeking clarification on any of the Recommended Readings.
- Send me your answers for correction and feedback at the e-mail address given above.