

MARY SHELLEY'S  
FRANKENSTEIN

**Instructor:**

**Pragna Paramita Mondal**

**Assistant Professor, Dept. of English**

**Narajole Raj College**

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**C4T: British Romantic Literature - Novel**

# Narrative Technique

- *The novel uses three different narrative perspectives and combines the first person narration of the three characters: Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the monster. Mary Shelley also incorporates the epistolary technique and builds the narrative in the form of letters.*
- *Shelley uses the embedded narrative format that involves a framing narrative (Walton's letters to his sister) and gradually moves into the main narrative (Victor's story) which is then complemented by the monster's story of survival and his education with the De Lacey family.*

# Narrative Structure (Plot)

- *There are three separate narrators and the narration is directed at or received by different audiences. Let us look at the 'reception' thread of the narrative in the novel. As readers, we learn directly about Robert Walton's expedition in his own words. He then meets Victor Frankenstein and his narrative is told to us through the letters (the epistolary narrative) which Robert Walton is writing to his sister. Finally, we hear the monster's account of his development, but this is conveyed to us by Victor. The monster's account is told to Walton who in turn is telling it both to his sister and to us as readers. The novel then returns to Victor's point of view and then finally to Walton's framing narrative.*

# Role of Science

- *“Frankenstein” is often considered to be a literary response to the Vitalism debate which prevailed from 1816 until 1820 between physician and surgeon John Abernethy and his pupil William Lawrence. In 1803, Giovanni Aldini used electricity to induce movement in the muscles of a recently executed murderer’s corpse. With such dramatic experiments firmly in the public consciousness, Frankenstein’s monster did not seem so far-fetched. Analogies between life and electricity thus began to emerge, since electricity came to be shown as a powerful life force. This revolution in scientific thought and the quest for cognitive transgression is what defines the central problem in the novel. Romanticism underlines an attitude of transcendence of the physical in pursuit of the metaphysical; Victor Frankenstein’s experiment in alchemy may also be regarded as an act of transgression into the realms of forbidden knowledge and the impossibility that such a quest presents us with.*

# Role of Science

- *It is also believed that Mary Shelley tried to warn readers about the dangers of science through her novel which is clearly reflected in the pronouncements contained in the Introduction of 1831 to her novel:*

*“Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself. In all matters of discovery and invention, even those that appertain to the imagination, we are continually reminded of the story of Columbus and his egg.”*

*The question therefore is one of proportionality – it is for us to understand whether Victor Frankenstein’s efforts in creating the monster are commensurate with what he has achieved scientifically. His scientific project has in fact depleted him, like an alchemic experiment, both emotionally and physically.*

# Role of Science

- *Mary Shelley further stated in her Introduction that it was a nightmare, which inspired her to write this novel: “Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanisms of the Creator of the world.”*

*As a scientist, Victor’s insatiable hunger for knowledge and power is reminiscent of Faust’s ambition. His experiment becomes a means of pointing out the limits of his knowledge and the ‘spark’ of life that he instills in the creature’s body in turn extinguishes his own divine imagination and confronts him with reality.*

- *“Frankenstein” is often identified as ‘the Origin of the Species’ of science fiction. The novel’s association with Darwinian philosophy should be taken into account while analyzing its representation of the perils of scientific knowledge and the hazards underlying human endeavours to control the evolution of life.*

# Title

- The title of “Frankenstein” indicates that it is the tale of the “Modern Prometheus”. While the novel shows us the darkest consequences of human knowledge using religion and nature as a counterpoint, Victor’s effort in creating life marks his attempt to elevate himself to a God-like stature and in turn suffer terrible consequences as a result of this inordinate ambition. The ‘metaphysical revolt’ that he embarks upon has a mythological resonance. In mythology the figure of Prometheus appears as the bearer of fire (pyrophoros) and as the creator of man (plasticator), and in both cases the Titan is the benefactor of man, his creation. Titan had a strong symbolic meaning in the nineteenth century, representing philanthropy, rebellion against the oppressor, and the struggle for social justice demanded by the labour movement; it was a subversive and transgressive image that fascinated the Romantic writers, who rebelled against rationalism and earlier aesthetic movements.*



# Title

- *The Promethean myth is explained by William Godwin himself in 'Pantheon', a book of Greek mythology that he had written for children:*

*“Prometheus, who surpassed the whole universe in mechanical skill and contrivance, formed a man of clay of such exquisite workmanship, that he wanted nothing but a living soul to cause him to be acknowledged the paragon of creation: Minerva, the goddess of arts, beheld the performance of Prometheus with approbation, and offered him any assistance in her power to complete his work; she conducted him to Heaven, where he watched his opportunity to carry off at the tip of his wand a portion of celestial fire, from the chariot of the sun: with this he animated his image: and the man of Prometheus immediately moved, and thought, and spoke, and became everything that the fondest wishes of his creator could ask.”*



# Title

- It must be understood that Mary Shelley was proposing an alternative discourse on the limits of Romantic idealism by recreating the Promethean myth of limitless ability and liberty in her novel “Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus”. Mary, as the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft and the wife of P. B. Shelley, grew up to be surrounded by Romantic discourses. However, “Frankenstein” is an indication of her will to redefine the dominant discourse and shift the epistemological hierarchy so as to explore opposing discourses on human knowledge.*

# Questions

1. *Justify the title of Mary Shelley's novel "Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus".*
2. *Discuss the narrative structure (plot) of the novel "Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus".*
3. *Comment on the narrative technique that Mary Shelley uses in her novel "Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus".*
4. *How are the role of science and the margins of human knowledge explored in Mary Shelley's novel "Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus"?*

# Recommended Readings

1. *Mark Asquith. "The Framing of Frankenstein: The Unusual Narrative Techniques in Mary Shelley's Novel". The English Review, April 2003.*
2. *Dorothea Wolschak, The Narrative Structure of "Frankenstein". The Modern Prometheus and Its Effect. 2013. Munich, Grin Verlag.  
<https://www.grin.com/document/275971>*
3. *Ana González-Rivas Fernández. "Aeschylus and Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus, by Mary Shelley". 2017.*
4. *Samira Sasani & Hamidreza Pilevar. "Modern Prometheus: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and Rejection of Romanticism". International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature. ISSN 2200-3592 (Print), ISSN 2200-3452 (Online). Vol. 6 No. 2; March 2017. Australian International Academic Centre, Australia.*

# Recommended Readings

5. *Eline Van Der Boog. "Re-imagining Life: Frankenstein And The Ethics Of Science". Utrecht University. 2015.*
6. *Markman Ellis. "Fictions of Science in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein". Sydney Studies.*
7. *Alexandra Kallman. "Speciesism in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein". Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University. 2015.*



# 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.*