

The (Still) Modern Prometheus

Frankenstein

Mary Shelley

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Fantasy/Horror

197 pages

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Review by Melissa B.

Imagine that the year is 1816, and yes, I'm aware that was quite a long time ago, but bear with me. The year is 1816 and you are an 18 year old woman who lives with her husband in Geneva and has recently given birth to her second child. But your life is not perfect. Two years ago, you eloped with your husband after his wife committed suicide. As a result, you were disowned by your father, a prominent philosopher and the widower of your mother. You now are a member of a prestigious literary circle. Within this group, you enter into a friendly "ghost story" competition and are tasked with producing a horror story. At first, you struggle to come up with an idea, but then you have a dream. A dream that changes everything.

Your imagination shivers with the image of a man hunched over his creation, a hideous being whose very existence contradicts the laws of nature. The creator is struck dumb with revulsion and wishes only that the monster might return to the watery abyss of death from whence he came. You wake with a start and know exactly what your story will be about.

You, my friend, are Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*, and you have just stumbled upon the basis of a novel imbued with meaning that will far outlast you. Because the story has its roots in such a distant time period, the language is confusing in places and

somewhat archaic, but the book offers so many important lessons that the extra time required to fully understand it is worth the investment.

The reader is immediately introduced to Walton, an explorer who narrates the story through correspondence with his sister. The real action begins when Walton encounters a weary, mysterious stranger who introduces himself as Dr. Victor Frankenstein and later reveals the grueling story of his scientific ambition and the unearthly creation that he brought about by meddling with the laws of nature and life. Shelley uses the fact that the narrator is not the protagonist to show the reader aspects of Frankenstein's character. In his fourth letter, Walton describes Victor:

I never saw a more interesting creature...there are moments when,
if one performs an act of kindness towards him...his whole
countenance is lighted up...But he is generally melancholy and
despairing...as if impatient of the weight of woes that oppress him.

This observation is just one example of Shelley's direct characterization, a technique she employs to make the emotional conflicts and personalities of each character clear and definite.

Although Shelley does spend an admittedly long time telling rather than showing, she is still successful in shaping extremely compelling and complex characters that entrap the reader. Dr. Frankenstein is faced with the guilt and responsibility of creation, and through these emotions, Shelley explores the issue of what exactly it is that makes us human. Are we still responsible for or capable of compassion in the face of a being that may have the mind of a human, but does not physically resemble one? The monster is prepared to make nearly any sacrifice for companionship and implores Frankenstein to help him, "I swear to you, by the earth which I inhabit, and by you that made me, that, with the companion you bestow, I will quit the

neighborhood of man,” but his pleas go unheard. Frankenstein refuses to help, fearing that the creation of another monster will only worsen the state of the world.

This decision creates conflict between the reader’s natural sympathy for the monster, a creature whose early ostracism later leads to violence against the loved ones of Dr. Frankenstein, and sympathy for a creator plagued with guilt over the nature of his creation. As a result, the conflict gradually grows into hatred and finally culminates in life-or-death stakes that keep the reader hooked until an epic finish.

Originally entitled *The Modern Prometheus* in reference to the Greek titan responsible for shaping Man out of clay, the novel addresses the burdens of creation and the ethical debate surrounding the right of man to alter nature, which is still being argued today. *Frankenstein* was followed by several other novels, including *The Last Man*, *Valperga*, and *Faulkner, A Novel*, but Shelley’s first novel is by far the most renowned. *Frankenstein*’s literary assets make it appealing to a highly diverse audience, including most high school students. The novel allows the reader to experience how creation changes a person forever, and its many lessons make it an indispensable and exciting read for all.