

A short guide to: Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

written by Jonathan Wong

Author Bio

Name: Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

Key facts:

- English writer
- Best known for Frankenstein, Gothic novel, published 1818
- Gothic novels, which combined horror and romance - and which were especially popular between 1790-1830 - were, in part, a reaction to the ‘Age of Enlightenment’ (a.k.a the ‘Age of Reason’)

Mini Plot Summary:

Gothic novel, set in Europe, about a scientist named Victor Frankenstein, who succeeds in making an artificial being. The being turns out to be a hideous Creature. The Creature is rejected by everyone who meets him, and he seeks revenge on his creator by murdering everyone he loves.

Extended Plot Summary:

The story of Frankenstein, set in the 18th century, is told through the letters of Robert Walton, who is the captain of a ship exploring the North Pole. His letters are addressed to his sister, Margaret, and in them, Walton recounts the conversations he has with a man named Victor Frankenstein.

During his journey to the North Pole, Walton spots a mysterious, gigantic figure (the Creature) moving across the ice. Soon after, he discovers a different figure: that of an emaciated man, stranded in the ice, named Victor Frankenstein.

Victor tells Walton that he has been pursuing the Creature, and he proceeds to tell Walton his bizarre and harrowing story. (Frankenstein's recounting of his story forms the main bulk of the narrative).

Victor first describes his upbringing. He was born wealthy, and his family life was happy and wholesome. Father: Alphonse Frankenstein, mother: Caroline Beaufort (deceased early in the story), brothers: Ernest and William, and adopted 'cousin': Elizabeth Lavenza. His 'cousin', Elizabeth, was the favourite of the family. 'Everyone loved [her]' - Victor most of all. She was adopted by Victor's parents from an orphanage in Milan. Another girl was soon taken in by the family: Justine Moritz. She was bestowed the role of William's nanny, and was also loved by all.

In his youth, Victor was obsessed with the outdated and fantastical theories of 'natural philosophers' such as Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus. After his mother dies of scarlet fever, Victor travels to the University of Ingolstadt to study the sciences. He excels, and shows that he is talented, obsessive and ambitious. Soon, Victor discovers a method to create life out of non-living matter. He creates an 8 ft tall Creature. He expects the Creature to be beautiful, but when it wakes, it is hideous. He is so terrified by the Creature that he abandons it, and when he returns (with his closest friend, Henry Clerval), it has fled.

Victor is so traumatised from the experience that he falls ill and takes four months to recover. Henry Clerval, who is kind and benevolent, spends the entire period nursing Victor back to health.

When Victor eventually returns to Ingolstadt, he discovers a letter from his father explaining that his brother, William, has been murdered. He then travels back home, to Geneva, and glimpses the Creature in the distance, scaling a mountain. He immediately believes it to be responsible for his brother's murder.

Victor soon finds out that Justine Moritz, William's nanny, has been accused of killing his brother. He is despondent. Justine is soon hanged for the crime, and Victor, overcome by feelings of guilt and remorse, heads to the mountains, where he finds the Creature.

The Creature recounts his own story to Victor. He proves, surprisingly, to be as articulate as any human being.

The Creature's story is this: he escaped from Victor's lab and wandered through the wilderness, eating berries and roots, and then he came upon a town where he was met with hatred and scorn. He escaped from this town, bruised and fearful, and soon moved into a hovel connected to a cottage. From his hovel, he observed a poor family living in the cottage (De Lucey [old father], Agatha [daughter], Felix [son], and later Safie [Felix's partner]) and learned, by observing them, how to speak and read. He approached the family, hoping to be accepted, but they were frightened of him and fled their own home. He traveled to Victor's hometown (possessing a journal containing Victor's personal details), all the while filled with anger at his creator. He stumbled across William, who he learns is Victor's brother, and decided to murder him. He then framed Justine Moritz.

The Creature asks Victor to create him a female companion, and he promises that (if granted his wish) he will leave for the South American wilderness, to reside there permanently, and will never disturb Victor or humankind again. He also promises that if he is NOT granted his wish, he will be fated to murder Victor's friends and family, and cause ruin upon Victor's life. Throughout his pleas, the Creature is woeful and miserable in demeanor. He is also eloquent, and his persuasive words ultimately convince Victor to help him. The Creature says that he will be watching over Victor to make sure he carries through with his promise.

Victor travels to Scotland with Clerval. He leaves Clerval for Orkney Islands, where he begins work on the female Creature. However, he is plagued with worries (e.g. the female spurning the male for mankind, enraging the male more ... the female Creature becoming even more evil ... the female and male breeding, creating a race that terrorises mankind) and he destroys the unfinished female Creature. The Creature watches through a window as the destruction occurs. He asks Victor to start work again, but Victor is defiant and refuses. The Creature makes a promise that he will 'be with [him] on [his] wedding night'.

Victor travels to Ireland. He discovers Clerval has been murdered (presumably by the Creature). He is imprisoned, as a suspect, and suffer a mental breakdown in prison due to his grief. He is soon acquitted and returns home with his father.

Victor hastens his marriage with Elizabeth. The night after their wedding, Victor hides Elizabeth in a room while he looks for the Creature. While he is searching, he hears a scream. The Creature has strangled Elizabeth to death. The Creature escapes.

Victor's father soon falls ill, and the pain of losing his favourite child, Elizabeth, causes him to die. Victor travels to the North Pole, vengeful, seeking out the Creature, determined to end him or else be ended by him. However, travelling through the harsh conditions, Victor is too weakened and has to stop. This is where Walton found him.

Victor demands that if he sees the Creature he must kill him. He warns Walton that the Creature's 'soul is as hellish as his form, full of treachery and fiend like malice'. His last words to Walton are to 'seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition'. Victor dies.

The Creature visits Victor's dead body on Walton's ship. He is distraught and remorseful. He tells Walton that his revenge has not brought him comfort, and that 'no sympathy may [he] ever find'. His 'crime has degraded [him] beneath the meanest animal'. He resolves to go as far North as he can, and then he will kill himself. He jumps out the window of the ship, escaping, and Walton watches him drift away on an ice-raft.

Overarching Themes:

- *Revenge*
 - Revenge can be a powerful driver. It consumes the Creature, who starts his life kind and hopeful of acceptance, but who is then shunned and hated by all of society. The Creature exacts revenge on his creator, Victor, but his actions 'degrade [him] beneath the meanest animal' and he finds little satisfaction in ruining Victor's life.
 - Victor - after his family is murdered by the Creature - is also driven primarily by revenge. He desire for revenge compels him to embark on a dangerous (and fatal) trip through the snow in pursuit of his foe.

- *Prejudice*
 - All of mankind, including Victor, are prejudiced towards the Creature, on account of his hideous face and giant stature. He is initially warm, inquisitive, and craves acceptance above all, but no-one is able to look

past his appearance. The most sympathy he receives is from a blind man named De Lucey.

- *Ambition*

- Contrast Victor and Walton, both of whom are ambitious.
- Victor's scientific ambitions lead him to his downfall, via the terrifying monster he creates, and the revenge exacted on him by said monster. He pushed his studies and experiments into newfound territories, and the dangers of his ambitions are laid plain.
- Walton's ambition, on the other hand, is to travel to the North Pole. His ship becomes stuck in the ice. When it is freed, he has to decide whether to continue or turn back. He decides that he 'cannot lead [his crew] unwillingly to danger' and returns home. Victor - at the end of his life - advises Walton to 'seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition'.

- *Isolation*

- The Creature detests his isolation (which is perhaps more profound because he is the only one of his kind) and he seeks acceptance, love and companionship. When he does not receive these things, he becomes hateful and vengeful.
- Victor is far happier when he is surrounded by his family. His reunions with his father and, above all, Elizabeth, revitalize him. When he is isolated, he is tormented by his Creature (and his Creature's vengeful acts) and he falls into various states of illness.

- *Responsibility*

- Although Victor abhors his creation, he also believes that he has a responsibility regarding its wellbeing. He was the one who created him and gave him life.
- When the Creature asks Victor to create him a companion, Victor initially agrees. He fears for his family, but he also feels a sense of duty towards the Creature. But whilst creating the female Creature, Victor ultimately resolves that his greater responsibility is towards mankind. He believes that unleashing another Creature on the world would be reckless and harmful.

- *Nature v Science*
 - The novel is very scenic, and Victor is often uplifted by the natural beauty of Switzerland, Germany, Scotland or wherever it is he is travelling.
 - The products of Victor's scientific endeavours, on the other hand, are the grotesque and terrifying. His creation haunts him. The Creature is something that Victor believes should not have been made.
 - The Creature is evidence that there is danger in stumbling into the unknown, recklessly, without careful thought or consideration.

Key Characters:

- *Victor Frankenstein*
 - Protagonist
 - Brilliant, ambitious scientist
 - Creates the Creature
 - The Creature exacts revenge on him
 - He then seeks revenge on the Creature
- *The Creature*
 - Ugly
 - Eloquent and sensitive
 - Scorned by humanity
 - Vengeful
 - Kills people that Victor loves
- *Robert Walton*
 - Ice explorer
 - Comes across a weakened Victor, stranded in the ice
 - Ambitious; wants to travel to the North Pole
 - Gets along well with Victor
 - Chooses to turn back his ship when faced with danger
- *Elizabeth Lavenza*
 - Victor's beautiful adopted 'cousin'
 - Cherished by the Frankenstein family

- Marries Victor
- Is murdered soon after by the Creature
- *Henry Clerval*
 - Victor's best friend
 - Nurses Victor back to health after he falls ill
 - (He fell ill from the shock of having created the hideous Creature)
 - Optimistic, helpful, loyal
 - Murdered by the Creature in Scotland

Other characters:

- De Lacey (old blind father of Felix and Agatha, lives in a cottage)
- Felix (son of De Lacey)
- Agatha (daughter of De Lacey)
- Safie (Felix's wife)
- Justine Moritz (wrongly convicted of murder)
- Margaret Saville (Walton's sister)

Key quotes:

‘Thus strangely are our souls constructed, and by such slight ligaments are we bound to prosperity or ruin.’

‘...the storm that was even then hanging in the stars, and ready to envelope me.’

‘Destiny was too potent, and her immutable laws had decreed my utter and terrible destruction.’

‘No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success.’

‘I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit.’

‘Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow creatures, who owe me nothing? They spurn and hate me.’

‘...the barbarity of man.’

‘This trait of kindness moved me sensibly. I had been accustomed, during the night, to steal a part of their store for my own consumption, but when I found that in doing this I inflicted pain on the cottagers, I abstained and satisfied myself with berries, nuts, and roots which I gathered from a neighbouring wood.’

‘At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification.’

‘I formed in my imagination a thousand pictures of presenting myself to them, and their reception of me. I imagined that they would be disgusted, until, by my gentle demeanour and conciliating words, I should first win their favour and afterwards their love.’

“‘The path of my departure was free,” and there was none to lament my annihilation. My person was hideous and my stature gigantic. What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?’

‘my heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures’

‘This was then the reward of my benevolence! I had saved a human being from destruction, and as a recompense I now writhed under the miserable pain of a wound which shattered the flesh and bone.’

‘He struggled violently. “Let me go,” he cried; “monster! Ugly wretch! You wish to eat me and tear me to pieces. You are an ogre. Let me go, or I will tell my papa.”’

‘I am malicious because I am miserable. Am I not shunned and hated by all mankind? You, my creator, would tear me to pieces and triumph; remember that, and tell me why I should pity man more than he pities me?’

‘Shall I respect man when he condemns me?’

‘...human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union.’

‘If any being felt emotions of benevolence towards me, I should return them an hundred and an hundredfold’

“‘You propose,” replied I, “to fly from the habitations of man, to dwell in those wilds where the beasts of the field will be your only companions. How can you, who long for the love and sympathy of man, persevere in this exile?””

“‘You swear," I said, "to be harmless; but have you not already shown a degree of malice that should reasonably make me distrust you?””

“‘Shall each man," cried he, "find a wife for his bosom, and each beast have his mate, and I be alone?””

‘The cup of life was poisoned forever’

‘I was possessed by a maddening rage when I thought of him, and desired and ardently prayed that I might have him within my grasp to wreak a great and signal revenge on his cursed head.’

‘His soul is as hellish as his form, full of treachery and fiendlike malice.’

“‘He seems to feel his own worth and the greatness of his fall.”

“‘When younger,” said he, “I believed myself destined for some great enterprise. My feelings are profound, but I possessed a coolness of judgment that fitted me for illustrious achievements. This sentiment of the worth of my nature supported me when others would have been oppressed, for I deemed it criminal to throw away in useless grief those talents that might be useful to my fellow creatures.””

‘From my infancy I was imbued with high hopes and a lofty ambition’

‘Even where the affections are not strongly moved by any superior excellence, the companions of our childhood always possess a certain power over our minds which

hardly any later friend can obtain. They know our infantine dispositions, which, however they may be afterwards modified, are never eradicated; and they can judge of our actions with more certain conclusions as to the integrity of our motives.'

'I must pursue and destroy the being to whom I gave existence; then my lot on earth will be fulfilled and I may die.'

'In a fit of enthusiastic madness I created a rational creature and was bound towards him to assure, as far as was in my power, his happiness and well-being. This was my duty, but there was another still paramount to that. My duties towards the beings of my own species had greater claims to my attention because they included a greater proportion of happiness or misery. Urged by this view, I refused, and I did right in refusing, to create a companion for the first creature. He showed unparalleled malignity and selfishness in evil; he destroyed my friends; he devoted to destruction beings who possessed exquisite sensations, happiness, and wisdom; nor do I know where this thirst for vengeance may end. Miserable himself that he may render no other wretched, he ought to die. The task of his destruction was mine, but I have failed.'

'Seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition'

'It is well that you come here to whine over the desolation you have made. You throw a torch into a pile of buildings; and when they are consumed, you sit among the ruins, and lament the fall. Hypocritical fiend!'

'No sympathy may I ever find'