

Frankenstein

Critical opinions and context

The novel was written in 1818 at the point when “The Age of Reason” or “Enlightenment” (probably most of the eighteenth century and the end of the seventeenth century) was being superseded by the ways of thinking and feeling of the Romantic movement. (This is often thought of as starting with the publication of “The Lyrical Ballads” by Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798.) Science, we might think of as a product of rationalism. The foundation of the Royal Society at Greenwich in 1660 was a crucial moment in this development in thought. It is interesting that in the Royal Society’s prospectus it states that the society will exclude theology and poetry from its studies.

“Frankenstein” reflects the scientific ethos of the Enlightenment with the production of the monster but it is also relevant to consider that Frankenstein effectively plays the role of God as a creator. This suggests that he is, perhaps, a product of the more sceptical and less “theological” age which preceded the publication of the novel.

One debate was that between the idea of a living “whole..... [being] more than a mere aggregation of its constituent parts”¹ Baldick adds: “It was upon this principle that Romantic Idealism founded its critique of the empiricist thought of the preceding century...”²

¹ Baldick, Chris, “In Frankenstein’s Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity and Nineteenth-Century Writing”, pub. OUP, 1987, pp.33-44

² Ibid., pp. 33-44

“Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein” takes its place within this pattern of Romantic contrasts between lifeless parts and living wholes...”³

“Viewed in this light, Victor Frankenstein’s error is to have confused the beauty of the dead limbs he has collected with the beauty of a whole organism.”⁴

Mary’s novel may have been influenced by her father, William Godwin’s, novel “St Leon, A Tale of the Sixteenth Century”. St Leon’s investigations bring about the deaths of his loved ones and other innocents: “Fatal legacy! Atrocious secrets of medicine and chemistry! Every day opened to my astonished and terrified sight a wider prospect of their wasteful effects!”⁵

Milton’s “Paradise Lost” was also a great influence on “Frankenstein”: “...the monster’s vengeful declaration of war against human kind arises from a bitter feeling of exclusion from human joys, a hopeless envy described in terms similar to Satan’s...”⁶

Blake thought Milton was “unwittingly of the Devil’s party”⁷ Shelley, the poet, showed some admiration for Satan in “Paradise Lost” in his preface to “Prometheus Unbound” while Mary Shelley at one point refers to Satan’s “sublime defiance”.

“The widespread cult of Prometheus in Romantic literature is often only a slightly Hellenized variant of the same heretical tendency.”⁸

³ Ibid., pp. 33-44

⁴ Ibid., pp. 33-44

⁵ Godwin, William, “St Leon, A Tale of the Sixteenth Century”, London, 1831 pp. 362-3

⁶ Pollin, Burton R., “Philosophical and Literary Sources of *Frankenstein*” in “Comparative Literature xvii, pub. 1965, pp. 100-1

⁷ Baldick, Chris, “In Frankenstein’s Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity and Nineteenth-Century Writing”, pub. OUP, 1987, pp.33-44

⁸ Ibid., pp. 33-44

“If Adam’s complaint in the epigraph is borne in mind...the novel begins to look like a nightmarish parody of patriarchal religion, in which the Son is made, not begotten...and women cede the power of Conception to men while being legally framed as criminals (like Eve) or torn to pieces. It is not too hard to imagine the pious readers of 1818 feeling that their God and His creation were being grimly mocked.”⁹

“Mary Shelley’s idea of the mind was, like Lawrence’s, based on the notion of the strictly physical evolution of the brain. This is how Lawrence was provocatively challenging his fellow members of the Royal College of Surgeons in his lectures of 1817:”But examine the “mind”, the grand prerogative of man! Where is the mind of the foetus? Where is that of a child just born? Do we not see it actually build up before our eyes by the actions of the five external senses, and of the gradually developed internal faculties? Do we not trace it advancing by a slow progress from infancy and childhood to the perfect expansion of its faculties in the adult....”¹⁰

Existentialism as a philosophy is summed up by the maxim:

“Existence precedes essence” (Sartre) (i.e. our existence (experience) gives us our “being”/”essence”.) The novel may be considered as having an existentialist dimension, i.e. an emphasis on man as knowing only what his experience can give him rather than relying on a “framework” like theology which gives a “meaning” to life. An example is the death of Frankenstein’s mother when the sheer shock of death is described very well. There is no mention of the consolations of an afterlife.

⁹ Ibid., pp.33-44

¹⁰ Holmes, Richard, “The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science”, pub. Harper Press, 2008, pp. 326-36

Empiricism (adjective – “empirical”) is the rational attempt to understand the “laws” of nature by observation and experiment – i.e. it is the basic methodology of science.

Julia Kristeva is associated with the theory of “abjection” in her account of the Gothic genre. Her theory is that we use the Gothic to present a distanced and rejected aspect of ourselves. In other words what is monstrous is what we recognise in ourselves but cannot accept in ourselves. So we create fictions – monsters and horrors – which we can feel are separate from us and which are “abjected”.

(The word is based on the Latin verb “abiacere” – to throw away – not in the popular use of the term as when we dispose of rubbish – but with the sense of casting beyond ourselves.)

Notes on “Frankenstein”

Romanticism

(The dangers of) rationalism and science

Existentialist dimension

Heaven and hell

Political comment

The Gothic

Volume 1

Letter 1 “...I perused, for the first time, those poets whose effusions entranced my soul, and lifted it to heaven.”

Letter IV (referring to Frankenstein): “The starry sky, the sea and every sight afforded by these wonderful regions, seems still to have the power of elevating his soul from earth.”

“You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be the serpent to sting you, as mine has been.”

Chapter 1

(Of Elizabeth) “Her imagination was luxuriant...”

“I delighted in investigating the facts relative to the actual world; she busied herself in following the aerial creations of the poets.”

(Of Henry Clerval) “His favourite study consisted in books of chivalry and romance....the principal characters of which were Orlando, Robin Hood, Amadis, and St George.”

“Natural philosophy [=science] is the genius that has regulated my fate...”

Chapter 2

On the death of his mother: “It is so long before the mind can persuade itself that she, whom we saw every day, and whose very existence appeared a part of our own, can have departed for ever – that the brightness of a beloved eye can have been extinguished....”

“...I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur* for realities of little worth**.”

*The alchemists’ pursuit of “the philosopher’s stone” and “the elixir of life”

** the humdrum experiments of empirical science

Chapter 3

Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed? It was a bold question, and one which has ever been considered as a mystery...

I do not ever remember to have trembled at a tale of superstition, or to have feared the apparition of a spirit....a church-yard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life....”

“I saw how the fine form of man was degraded and wasted; I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life.”

“...I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter.”

“Learn from me,....how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow.”

“Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world.”

“The summer months passed while I was thus engaged, heart and soul, in one pursuit. It was a most beautiful season; never did the fields bestow a more plentiful harvest, or the vines yield a more luxuriant vintage: but my eyes were insensible to the charms of nature.”

“Winter, spring and summer, passed away during my labours; but I did not watch the blossom or the expanding leaves – sights which before always yielded me supreme delight, so deeply was I engrossed in my occupation.”

Chapter 4

“dreams that had been my food and pleasant rest for so long a space, were now become a hell to me..”

“It was a divine spring;”

Chapter 5

(Letter from Elizabeth) “A farmer’s is a very healthy happy life; and the least hurtful, or rather the most beneficial profession of any.”

“The republican institutions of our country have produced simpler and happier manners than those which prevail in the great monarchies that surround it.”

“A servant in Geneva [is] a condition which, in our fortunate country, does not include the idea of ignorance, and a sacrifice of the dignity of a human being.”

“I had conceived a violent antipathy even to the name of natural philosophy.”

“Clerval was no natural philosopher. His imagination was too vivid for the minutiae of science.”

“...he again taught me to love the aspect of nature, and the cheerful faces of children.”

“...happy, inanimate nature had the power of bestowing on me the most delightful sensations. A serene sky and verdant fields filled me with ecstasy. The present season was indeed divine...”

Chapter 6

(Letter from Victor's father regarding the murder of William) “...not brooding thoughts of vengeance against the assassin, but with feelings of peace and gentleness, that will heal, instead of festering the wounds of our minds.”

“...he now sleeps with his angel mother..” (said by Clerval)

““the palaces of nature,” were not changed.” (quotation from Byron)

“...the delight I took in again beholding thy streams, thy mountains, and more than all, thy lovely lake.”

“vivid flashes of lightning dazzled my eyes, illuminating the lake, making it appear like a vast sheet of fire...”

Chapter 7

“I did confess; but I confessed a lie. I confessed that I might obtain absolution; but now that falsehood lies heavier at my heart than all my other sins. The God of heaven forgive me!”

“I bore a hell within me, which nothing could extinguish.”

Volume 2

Chapter 1

“Yet my heart overflowed with kindness, and the love of virtue.”

“...solitude was my only consolation – deep, dark, death-like solitude.”

“...and when the sun had set, we beheld immense mountains and precipices overhanging us on every side, and heard the sound of the river raging among rocks, and the dashing of waterfalls around.”

“But it was augmented and rendered sublime by the mighty Alps, whose white and shining pyramids and domes towered above all, as belonging to another earth, the habitations of another race of beings.”

Chapter 2

“These sublime and magnificent scenes afforded me the greatest consolation that I was capable of receiving.”

“[the glacier] filled me with a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul, and allowed it to soar from the obscure world to light and joy.”

“ ‘Devil!’ I exclaimed, ‘do you dare approach me?’ “

“Remember, that I am thy creature: I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed....misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.”

“Cursed be the day, abhorred devil, in which you first saw light!”

“For the first time, also, I felt what the duties of a creator towards his creature were, and that I ought to render him happy before I complained of his wickedness.”

Chapter 3

“Before I had quitted your apartment, on a sensation of cold, I had covered myself with some clothes; but these were insufficient to secure me from the dews of night. I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch...”

“...I found a fire which had been left by some wandering beggars, and was overcome with delight at the warmth I experienced from it.....I was in the greatest fear lest my fire should be extinguished...”

“Food, however, became scarce; and I often spent the whole day searching in vain for a few acorns to assuage the pangs of hunger...”

“But I was enchanted by the appearance of the hut: here the snow and rain could not penetrate...”

“Here then I retreated , and lay down, happy to have found a shelter, however miserable...”

Chapter 4

“They were not entirely happy. The young man and his companion often went apart, and appeared to weep...it was poverty: and they suffered that evil in a very distressing degree.”

“...but when I found that in doing this I inflicted pain on the cottagers, I abstained...”

Chapter 5

“I heard of the discovery of the American hemisphere, and wept with Safie over the hapless fate of its original inhabitants...”

“I heard of the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty;...”

“...high and unsullied descent united with riches [are valued] ...without either [a man] was considered, except in very rare instances, a vagabond and a slave, doomed to waste his powers for the profit of the chosen few.”

“No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses...”

Chapter 6

The love of Felix and Safie

Chapter 7

“Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them.”

Chapter 8

“Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live? Why, in that instant, did I not extinguish the spark of existence which you had so wantonly bestowed?”

“As the night advanced, a fierce wind arose from the woods, and quickly dispersed the clouds that had loitered in the heavens: the blast tore along like a mighty avalanche, and produced a kind of insanity in my spirits...”

“Nature decayed around me, and the sun became heatless; rain and snow poured around me; mighty rivers were frozen; the surface of the earth was hard, and chill, and bare, and I found no shelter. Oh earth! How often did I imprecate curses on the cause of my being!”

Chapter 9

“I am malicious because I am miserable; am I not shunned and hated by all mankind?”

“I do not destroy the lamb and the kid, to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment.”

Volume 3

Chapter 1

“But the fresh air and bright sun seldom failed to restore me to some degree of composure...”

“He [Clerval] pointed out to me the shifting colours of the landscape, and the appearances of the sky. ‘This is what it is to live;’ he cried, now I enjoy existence!...”

“In truth I was occupied by gloomy thoughts, and neither saw the descent of the evening star, nor the golden sun-rise reflected in the Rhine.”

“...but there is a charm in the banks of this divine river, that I never before saw equalled.”

“He was a being formed in the very ‘poetry of nature’.”

The author quotes from Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” suggesting that Clerval is a kindred spirit of Wordsworth’s, associating him with the Romantic sensibility.

Chapter 2

“But in Clerval I saw the image of my former self....”

“During my youthful days discontent never visited my mind; and if I was ever overcome by ennui, the sight of what is beautiful in nature...could always interest my heart, and communicate elasticity to my spirits...”

“...and I feared the effect of the daemon’s disappointment.”

“The thatch had fallen in, the walls were unplastered, and the door was off its hinges.”

Chapter 3

“I had feelings of affection, and they were requited by detestation and scorn.”

Chapter 4

“...but my general state of feeling was a torpor, in which a prison was as welcome a residence as the divinest scene in nature...”

“William, Justine and Clerval, had died through my infernal machinations...”

Chapter 5

“...I am the cause of this – I murdered her. William, Justine and Henry – they all died by my hands.”

“[I] dared to whisper paradisaical dreams of love and joy; but the apple was already eaten, and the angel’s bared to drive me from all hope.”

“Look at the innumerable fish that are swimming in the clear waters, where we can distinguish every pebble that lies at the bottom. What a divine day! How happy and serene all nature appears!”

Chapter 6

“A grin was on the face of the monster; he seemed to jeer, as with his fiendish finger he pointed towards the corpse of my wife.”

“...I lost sensation, and chains and darkness were the only objects that pressed upon me. Sometimes, indeed, I dreamt that I wandered in flowery meadows and pleasant vales with the friends of my youth; but awoke, and found myself in a dungeon.”

Chapter 7

“I darted towards the spot from which the sound proceeded; but the devil elided my grasp. Suddenly the broad disk of the moon arose, and shone full upon his ghastly and distorted shape, as he fled with more than mortal speed.”

“The spirits that guarded me had provided these moments, or rather hours, of happiness that I might retain strength to fulfil my pilgrimage.”

“...I pursued my path towards the destruction of the daemon, more as a task enjoined by heaven,...”

“...calling on heaven to support me...”

“...but the real beings who visit him from the regions of a remote world...”

“...like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained in an eternal hell.”

“You may give up your purpose; but mine is assigned to me by heaven, and I dare not. I am weak; but the spirits who assist my vengeance will endow me with sufficient strength.”

“Seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries.”

“Think ye that the groans of Cherval were music to my ears? My heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy....”

“...while he accumulated wretchedness and despair upon me, he sought his own enjoyment in feelings and passions from the indulgence of which I was for ever barred, then impotent envy and bitter indignation filled me with an insatiable thirst for vengeance.”

“Some years ago, when the images which this world affords first opened upon me, when I felt the cheering warmth of summer, and heard the rustling of the leaves and the chirping of the birds..... I should have wept to die...”

