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About Mary Shelley, Frankenstein
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Why?
It is such a popular novel, known for its difficult structure, intertextuality and complicated language.

Which?
Two versions exist, both written by Mary Shelley (1818-1831), which is unusual, as an author tends to write just one version. M. Shelley however, after decades, decided to edit herself.

The majority of people, furthermore, believe Frankenstein is the name of the monster and not of the creator, Victor Frankenstein. Frankenstein himself refers to his creature as the “Monster”, while it should be called “Creature” as a result of an experiment conducted by him.

Who’s the victim and who’s the villain?
It is difficult to tell whose the victim and the villain: reading “Frankenstein” proves to be an interesting experience as, by the end of the novel, the story leaves you totally disoriented. It is impossible to find a canonical division of good and bad. Such unclear division leads to a consideration about stereotype:
“This story teaches you that stereotypes can be demolished, proves that we were wrong” (Maria Parrino).

Novel and encyclopedia
Cathegory: novel but also encyclopedia, as the the novel presents various themes:
- **Fathering and mothering**: “It is a story of giving birth” (Parrino). The “father” Victor does not know what it means to be a father (he is a self-made one, as he “gave birth” without a mother). The novel is also based on families (Frankenstein’s and others), in which woman are represented weak or they simply die. It can be called a “story of generation”, as the main action is to give birth and, weirdly, there is no woman to do so. The relationships portrayed, moreover, present not conventional families: adopted children, brothers and sister... etc.

- **Sexuality**: there is an absolute lack of sexuality, as the conception of the monster is done in the absence of a woman.

- **Psychology**: the whole novel is based on complicated relationships, between the Creature and people, the Creature and Its father, friends and partners.

- **Ethics**: By creating life, Victor competes with God, by doing something that only God can do. **Is it correct for a human being to do something that is supposedly divine?** Did Victor do what was right? **Did he go beyond human limits?** Victor tries something that nobody had ever tried before, because he wants to be the first one.

- **Politics**: How we deal with politics in life? How do we oppose those against us?

- **Geography**: It is a story that travels, as Mary Shelley herself was a globetrotter.

**FRANKENSTEIN AND... CRITICAL APPROACHES**

**FEMINIST**: the novel of Frankenstein made women say a lot (as it touches delicate themes, such as the desire to be a mother, the relationship with the body, frustration)

**MARXIST**: Franco Moretti considered “Frankenstein” under a Marxist vision, describing the monster as the image of proletariat and Frankenstein as the image of capitalist.
PSYCHANALYTIC: during the night of the creation, Victor dreams about holding and kissing Elizabeth, his fiancé, when suddenly she becomes the corpse of his dead mother.

GENETIC ENGINEERING: story of manipulation; in assembling the Creature, Victor uses a combination of various body parts and also parts of animals.

THE WOMAN WHO WROTE FRANKENSTEIN
Her parents were William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. Her mother sadly died a few days after giving birth to Mary, due to the consequences of the delivery. Mary, subconsciously, always blamed herself for her mother’s death.

MARY WOLLESTONECRAFT: she was a proto-feminist, writer of “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”, and lastly she was friends with Henry Fuseli.

WILLIAM GODWIN: he was a political philosopher committed to politics and writing, who was friends with Samuel T. Coleridge.

MARY GODWIN

PERCY B. SHELLEY: He was a romantic poet. In 1816 Percy and M. Shelley got engaged. They had 4 children together but sadly three of them died at a very young age.

Mary and her husband travelled a lot together and, in Villa Diodati, they came in contact with Byron, Polidori and Claire Clairmont. There is a story that goes about the time they all spent together in Villa Diodati, and it is the story of how the novel of Frankenstein was conceived.
There was a competition in which everybody had to write a ghost story during the night and Mary Shelley was the only one to come up with a story, the story of Frankenstein.

ITALY
She visited Venice, Rome, Naples, Florence and Pisa. Since a very young age she was able to converse, write and read in Italian. She was even willing to translate from Italian to English “I promessi sposi”, but unfortunately the job was denied to her. It was also in Italy where Percy, in 1822, went out sailing and sadly never came back, leaving Mary a widow at the age of only 25.

FRANKENSTEIN
2 VERSIONS:

FIRST EDITION (1818):
- Anonymous
- Preface by Percy Shelley
- Walter Scott’s review (he indicated Percy Shelley as the writer of the novel)

SECOND EDITION (1831):
- Introduction
- She changed some words, which her husband had previously changed, into Anglo-Saxon language.

THE TITLE
“Frankenstein or the modern Prometheus” (both first and second edition)
PROMETHEUS= it is a myth, consequently it is impossible to go back to the origin
Frankenstein became also a myth

ITALIAN TRANSLATIONS
The first one was realized in 1944, and before that the novel was slightly known. After the late seventies and eighties it became one of the most popular novels of all time.

LITERALLY INFLUENCES
She was inspired by J. Milton, S. T. Coleridge and W. Wordsworth. The Creature, moreover, at a certain point of the story, finds in the woods a box containing books. He does not know how to read, however, he learns by listening to a family who reads aloud. When he finds the books, therefore, he reads them avidly:

- **LIVES, PLUTARCH**
  He learns about families. The creature is happy to read this book, as he finds something he did not know.

- **PARADISE LOST, MILTON**
  He finds different parallelisms: just as the rebellious angel, Victor rebels to God and the Creature rebels to his creator. **He compares himself to the book.**

- **THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER, GOETHE**
  The Creature does not know what love is, as nobody ever told him. At one point he had asked Victor to create a companion for him, but he refused. **The monster learns love through books** (reference to the importance of books for Mary Shelley).
PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES
John Locke: the concept of “tabula rasa” and learning by experience
Rosseau: Discourse of iniquity

The novel assumes the traits of a philosophical novel.

SCIENTIFIC INFLUENCES
Erasmus Darwin: theory of evolution
Luigi Galvani: the experimental aspect = how to give life to a dead body.
There was no electricity, but still, life is generated through a spark.

THE SPARK OF LIFE

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Letters written by Robert Walton to his sister tell the story of Frankenstein. The name of the sister is Margaret Saville (M.S.= Mary Shelley)
She is not a character, as she does not contribute directly to the story, but the receives everything.