

The *Frankenstein* Complex or *The Disturbing Otherness*

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Abstract

The text is to attempt to re-examine a novel from the age of English pre-Romanticism, published almost two centuries ago—in 1818—*Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* by Mary Shelley. Written in the tradition of the English ‘gothic’ ghost novel, as horror novel, Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is also considered the first authentic foundation of a new genre—*science fiction*.

The romantic longing for the unknown, for rebellion or unfettered ambition to surpass the limits of human possibilities, as well as the curse/punishment for such an act, are traditionally associated to the myth of Prometheus. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is also related to and imbued with the legend of the Golem, as well as the Faustian motif.

Anthropologically the pair of Frankenstein and the creature implies a separation, a differentiation of the human from the animal taking place inside man himself, and the above duality might also be considered in the spirit of the contemporary theories of identity and otherness. The problem of Otherness in Mary Shelley’s novel, has ethical and moral, anthropological and psychoanalytical aspect, but also an obvious gender feature.

The paper aims to illustrate the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley as one of the most representative examples of literary myth.

Keywords: Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, Identity, Otherness

“... fundamentally, man *is* the choice to be God.”

Jean-Paul Sartre

The eruption of the Tambora volcano on the Indonesian island of Sumbawa, which took place two centuries ago, that is in 1815, is the deadliest volcanic eruption in recorded human history, with worldwide consequences. The following year, 1816, was historically recorded as ‘the summerless year’, with winter snow settling in Europe and the USA until June.

During the very summer of 1816, the Villa Diodati on the shore of Lake Léman near Geneva gathered Lord Byron, his personal physician Polidori, and the married couple Mary and Percy B.

Shelley.¹ Often trapped indoors for days on end by the inhospitable, cold weather and incessant rain, they would spend the evenings gathered around the blazing fire and amuse themselves by reading whatever German ghost stories they came across. At Byron's suggestion, each of the four of them was to write a ghost story. This is how Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* sprang to existence. It could be said that the eruption of the Indonesian volcano Tambora was the primarily responsible for one of the most popular works in literary history and cinema.

Mary Shelley (1797-1851)², started 'writing stories' as early as her childhood years, while her favourite pastime (according to her personal testimony) was 'the formation of castles in the air – the indulging in waking dreams' (Shelley, 1994: 5). She rose to literary fame due to her first novel *Frankenstein*, which overshadowed all her other works and earned her a lasting place in literary history. Composed in the tradition of the English 'gothic' novel of apparitions, as a novel of fear and horror, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is considered the first genuine foundation of a new genre, *science fiction*, while "the monstrous creation (which, in the layperson's mind, is its creator's namesake) became one of the most enduring symbols of the SF genre" (Živković, 1990: 721).

Having initially begun writing it as a short story, following the encouragement of her husband, Mary Shelley developed the plot into a novel. In the introduction to the 1831 edition, she evokes the nightmares that gave rise to *Frankenstein*: after the long polemic between Byron and Shelley (of which she herself was an intent, yet almost silent listener) on the nature of the life principle and the possibility of its discovery and transfer, on the experiments of Dr. Erasmus Darwin (Charles Darwin's grandfather), on galvanism, and a variety of other philosophical doctrines, "[w]hen I placed my head

¹ This meeting is the subject matter of the excellent film of late director Ken Russell, *Gothic* (1986), featuring Natasha Richardson in the role of Mary Shelley.

² Mary Shelley was born in London, as a daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, the first English feminist (who died soon after childbirth), and English philosopher, progressive thinker, and writer, William Godwin. Open-minded, curious and eager to learn, Mary entered into a romantic relationship with the poet Percy B. Shelley in 1814 and eloped with him (and her step-sister Clair Clairmont), so as to avoid her father's disdain for conducting an affair with a married man. Two years later, following the suicide of Shelley's first wife, they got married. They spent most of their short and tragedy-laden married life (out of four children, only their son, Percy Florence, survived) in Italy, the pilgrimage-country of English romanticists. After Shelley's death by drowning in a summer storm in 1822, Mary returned to England and lived on as a professional writer until her death in 1851. Mary Shelley's literary life was quite prolific. She entered the literary stage at the same time as Percy B. Shelley, in 1817, by publishing her travelogue *History of a Six Weeks' Tour through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany and Holland; with Letters Descriptive of a Sail Round the Lake of Geneva, and of the Glaciers of Chamouni*. Apart from *Frankenstein*, which was published anonymously in 1818, she also authored the novella *Mathilda* (1819), the historical novels: *Valperga* (1823), a feminist version of Walter Scott's historical novels, and *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (1830); then, the apocalyptic avant-garde (futurist) novel *The Last Man* (1826), the events of which take place in 2073, as well as the novels: *Lodore* (1835) and *Falkner* (1837). In the 1820s and 30s she often wrote *short stories* about the popular gift books, while between 1832 and 1839 she wrote numerous *biographies* of eminent Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, and Frenchmen, as well as of a few women, for the needs of Dionysius Lardner's 133-volume encyclopaedia, *Lives of the Most Eminent Literary and Scientific Men*. Mary Shelley also edited and popularised the works of her husband; she edited and published *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1824) and *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1839). Her last work was the travel narrative *Rambles in Germany and Italy, in 1840, 1842, and 1843* (1844), modelled after the *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) by her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft.

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on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision, —I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. ... Oh! if I could only contrive one which would frighten my reader as I myself had been frightened that night!” (Shelley, 1994: 8-9).

Almost identical is the scene in the novel where the young student of natural philosophy, Swiss-born Victor Frankenstein, searching for the ‘elixir of life’, in his workshop or secluded cell on the top floor of his house, creates a monster of diverse human body parts, collected from morgues:

“It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs” (Shelley, 1994: 55).

Horrified by the abominable appearance of the creature he has created, the scientist abandons and rejects it. Embittered and lonesome, desperate and miserable, the giant human-like creature exacts cruel vengeance against its creator: begins murdering his loved ones. Victor decides to destroy it. The creator turns against its own creation. They meet in the Alps and, through their conversation the reader discovers the creature’s view of its essentially mournful state, which brings about its transformation into a monster. Once Victor refuses to create a woman-companion for him, the monster murders his wife Elizabeth on their wedding day. The pursuit continues. The pursuer and the pursued reach the Polar Regions, or more specifically, the Arctic, where Frankenstein, ill and weary, dies. Unable to imagine life without his creator and arch-enemy, the monster decides to abandon the world himself and disappears in the frozen land of the North Pole.

Events in the novel are not presented immediately, but narrated in the form of letters and journal entries, in the manner in which the narrator, Robert Walton, the skipper of an English ship that embarks on an exploratory expedition to the North Pole, has heard them first-hand from Victor Frankenstein, when their paths cross and he offers him shelter on the ship. The letters and journal entries are addressed to a third person, absent from the plot - Margaret Saville, Walton’s sister. Thus, the events have been experienced in the first person, but are narrated in the third person and set in a narrative framework. In fact, they constitute ‘a story within a story within a story...’, because the plot

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is multi-layered and several different focusing strings partake in its weaving: primarily Victor, the monster, and Walton. When these three primary narrations (testimonies) are coupled with Victor's correspondence with Elizabeth and with his father, it becomes clear that this is a mosaic-like, poly-perspective text.

The epistolary technique, which is the bearing (framework) technique in *Frankenstein's* narrative structure, was a considerably popular novel form in Mary Shelley's age; one may remember novels such as *Julie, or the New Heloise* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Indeed, precisely this novel by Goethe is part of the monster's reading list through which, alongside Milton's *Paradise Lost* and a volume of Plutarch's *Lives*, he becomes educated on the subject of human emotions. This represents a kind of elegant 'homage' to literary predecessors, as well as an inter-textual literary layer that heralds the new sensibility in Romanticism. In the novel, Mary Shelley incorporates portions of the canons of her contemporaries, the English romanticists, with considerable success: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Mutability" by Percy B. Shelley, and "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798" by William Wordsworth. It can be argued that the novel constitutes a palimpsest of most heterogeneous texts.

The novel is analogously rich in its themes, as well: *the doppelgänger, the metamorphosis, the resurrection of the corpse*, or a form of *vampirisation* (the creation relentlessly pursues its creator and intends to destroy him), accompanied by the effect of fear and horror, are undoubtedly included in the repertoire of fantastical themes and motifs (according to: Tz. Todorov, R. Caillois, Z. Mišić, V. Urošević, et al.); in Mary Shelley they represent a fruit of the heritage of the gothic novel. On the other hand, the absence of the irrational signifies distancing from the fantastic. Hence the conditional parallel and complementation with Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, for instance, as one of the numerous founding 'myths' of fiction: as long as *Dracula* is classified as a supernatural being, the creature produced by Frankenstein is not the outcome of a supernatural phenomenon, but rather a construction of the archetype of artistic creation (Krzywkowski, 2010: 335). In fact, scholars aver that Mary Shelley makes a pioneering attempt at elucidating fantastic elements (the resurrected corpse) from the viewpoint of 'science', which would later provide a pattern for the entire structure of science fiction, while Frankenstein is the prototype of the future 'cursed' or 'mad scientist' (in R. L. Stevenson, H. G. Wells, etc.).

The story of Frankenstein is an echo of the old Jewish legend of Golem: according to the Kabbalah, it is possible to create a humanoid creature of clay and mud with the aid of a magical word formula. "In the basic traits of this story, Romanticism recognised intersections with its essential themes: the Promethean protest against supreme authority and the Faustian curse that accompanies the

insatiable pursuit of the Absolute, which exceeds the limits imposed by moral norms”, emphasises Vlada Urošević in a study dedicated to the phenomenon of ‘making the Other’ (Urošević, 2005: 387). Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* pierces into precisely these three myths: the legend of Golem, the myth of Prometheus, and the motif of Faust.

During his studies, Victor Frankenstein is committed to his secret project of creating an artificial human being, yet not of mud, like his ancient predecessors, the kabbalists, but of corpses’ body parts. The manner of reanimation of the conglomeratically assembled ‘man’ remains unclear, although some scholars maintain that this is achieved through electricity, which is not implausible, since the use of electrical energy led to significant scientific and technical advancement during the very era of Romanticism. The novel does feature a fascination with electricity (when the child Victor witnesses the destructive power of thunder for the first time), yet its use is never overtly referred to. (There is a reference to certain instruments that produce the spark of life.) Alongside the profound knowledge of human anatomy, medicine, and chemistry, the use of then current theory of galvanism as a possible way of reanimating the cadaver is also evident. On the other hand, ever since the age of thirteen, Victor has evinced an interest in alchemy (he reads Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, Albertus Magnus), which would not wane even after his encounter with natural sciences. In his affinity for esoteric teachings, Frankenstein resembles Goethe’s Faust: namely, Faust, too, is torn between the magic typical of the Middle Ages and modern-day science. He, too, embraces magic in the name of elevated knowledge and the meaning of existence. The difference lies in the fact that Faust signs a contract with Mephistopheles (the devil) so as to penetrate the secrets of the universe, while Frankenstein, empirically, in his laboratory, gains insight into the vitalising (life-giving) principle. Also: “he does not ask the devil for help, but creates a devil of his own” (Kovačević, 1983: 314).

The romanticist longing for the unknown, the rebelliousness or the overarching ambition to exceed the limits of human capability, as well as the curse/punishment for this act have traditionally been associated with Prometheanism. Is Frankenstein truly ‘the modern Prometheus’ as the novel’s subtitle suggests? According to the *Dictionary of Symbols* by Chevalier and Gheerbrant, as a descendant of the titans, Prometheus has an inherent proclivity to rebellion. However, it is not a rebellion of the senses, but a rebellion of the spirit that desires to be equated with divine intelligence or at least to steal a few sparks of light from it (Шевалие, Гербран, 2005: 825). To Gaston Bachelard the Prometheus myth illustrates *the human desire for intellectuality*; he suggests the term *Prometheus complex*, which refers to “all those tendencies which impel us to *know* as much as our fathers, more than our fathers, as much as our teachers, more than our teachers” (Bachelard, 1964: 12). This we can achieve only by acquiring knowledge, by perfecting one’s objective understanding. “The acquiring of supremacy through the drive of more powerful instincts” (Bachelard, 1964: 12). The Prometheus complex is “the Oedipus complex of the life of the intellect” (Bachelard, 1964: 12). According to later

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legends, Prometheus is not merely a friend and benefactor of humankind, but its creator as well, a god who created man of earth and water, then gave him the fire that he had secretly stolen from Zeus (Срејовић, Цермановић, 1979: 363). This meaning of Prometheus, too, may serve as a model for Mary Shelley's novel.

Frankenstein is a typical Promethean figure: he dares to create a living being, which represents an act of sacrilege, since the creation of life is exclusively reserved for God. Like Prometheus, he must suffer, too: the Judeo-Christian guilt complex results in punishment of the scientist who becomes a victim of his own invention. Thus, the scientist's responsibility towards his creation, as well as towards the Others, is problematised. Paradoxically, the triumph and power of the creative genius lead to tragic consequences and demise. Referring to the Prometheus myth in the subtitle of her novel, the authoress indicates the symbolical meaning of the story: Prometheanism symbolises eternal light, the fire of knowledge sought by both Victor and Walton. The former quests for the uncharted geography of the mind, while the latter for the uncharted geography of the world, yet both are intoxicated and enticed by the same poison of ambition. The novel criticises the utopia and rationalism of the Enlightenment, while also performing a didactic-moralising function: Victor's sinister story is an instructive cautionary tale to Walton. Once he realises that the quest for unexplored knowledge may prove fatal, he decides to terminate his exploratory journey and return to England.

Another interesting aspect is the motive that galvanises Frankenstein to action – the need to be remembered as a conqueror of death: “Wealth was an inferior object, but what glory would attend the discovery if I could banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!” (Shelley, 1994: 39). “Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me” (Shelley, 1994: 39). Who is the irrational one here? Is the creator not less reasonable than his creation? In this respect, Harold Bloom notes that Victor Frankenstein has well-intentioned impulses, but he amounts to nothing more than a “moral idiot” considering the monster that he creates (Bloom, 2007: 6). Without doubt, the scientist's task is to pose questions in order to bring humanity one step forward, yet the fatal paradox lies in the fact that the novel highlights the destructive power contained in tampering with rules and the unknown. If nothing else, this comprises yet another world literature attempt at the human quest for eternity...

Psychoanalytically, the pair creator-creation (author-work) may, on the one hand, be viewed as the parent-child pair (the lack of attention and parental love during childhood results in violent behaviour), and, on the other, as the good and bad sides of a single complex human character (similar to Stevenson's Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde), or an embodiment of the conscious and the unconscious element of one's personality. Anthropologically, the dichotomy Frankenstein-monster

implies a separation, a differentiation between the human and the animalistic occurring within man. This dichotomy may also be conceived of in the spirit of contemporary theories of identity and otherness.

Who is the monster? Is he a demonic creature by nature, or does the human society, which ostracises and isolates him, force him to turn evil? Is his outward aspect the reason for exclusion from the community or a manifestation of inherent monstrosity? Nameless (without an identity), without descent and home, bereft of love, condemned to solitude or inner exile, the monster is the prototype of the alienated romanticist (anti)hero, who suffers from the famous 'Weltschmerz': an outsider, the wretched, exiled Other, the mournful dispossessed outcast of society, 'Natural Man' in the sense of Rousseau's idea of the 'noble savage'; initially, he is depicted as harbouring noble feelings, helping others, having a discerning, subtle sense of beauty (music), yet forced to hide, since each encounter with human beings generates fear, revulsion, and rejection. On the other hand, the monster is a fatal (demonic) type of hero who destroys everyone that enters his orbit: usually unknowingly, due to misunderstandings and misconceptions and rejection of the environment, as well as due to his physical appearance, yet knowingly and vindictively - with regard to his creator. Through Rousseau's idea that man is good by nature, and is turned evil by society, the ethical issue of good vs. evil is problematised, although, in the romanticist spirit, Mary Shelley envisions it dialectically, as a complementary unity.

Nevertheless, the novel may also be read as criticism of the excessive individualism and egoism of traditional Romanticism, since the rest of the characters anticipate some of the abovementioned traits: both Victor and Walton are infected with the virus of solitude (owing to their missions), intoxicated by the selfsame poison of ambition, and even the family that the monster watches and hides with is exiled. Only Victor's friend, Henry Clerval, embodies the supreme romanticist ideal of freedom: a typical cosmopolitan soul (connoisseur of languages, cultures, and peoples), a devotee of adventure novels and heroic feats, a nomad in touch with nature, which reflects his subtle emotional states and yearnings.

Apart from ethically-moral (in the spirit of Christianity), anthropological, and psychoanalytical aspects, the issue of Otherness (alterity) also has an evident foundation in gender. Shelley portrays her female characters on the grounds of the way in which women were treated in her own era, that is, she poses the question of subordination and inequality in the rights and power that women had at the time. Not coincidentally, all female characters in the novel are passive and play a subordinate role in the family or in their relations to men (Victor's wife, his mother, her adopted daughter Justine). Mary Shelley – the woman-writer in men's world of literature – seems to claim: "We are as doomed as Frankenstein's monster, struggling for identity and yet constructed by a man" (Heath, Boreham, 2005: 116). This is Prometheanism, too, a rebellion in the name of women's

emancipation, a kind of competition with men. Mind is genderless. “Mary Shelley, like Wordsworth, carried on the revolution “at the level of words”. Writing at least allowed women to compete on equal terms with men. “Gothic fiction”, as an experimental form of *transgression*, permitted them to test the limits of sexuality, identity, revolution, scientific advances and decaying family bonds in abstract, fictional terms” (Heath, Boreham, 2005: 116) and bring the dominant male ideology into question. “To establish oneself as a woman-writer as firmly as possible in such conditions, to maintain the challenge of the relentless quest for one’s self, constitutes a kind of despair and furious energy” reckons Stefan Mišo (Мишо, 2009: 132). In this sense, Mary Shelley’s contribution is of tremendous importance.

Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus is a work that inspired the subsequent creators of science fiction and the horror genre, such as Bram Stoker, Robert Louis Stevenson, H. G. Wells, etc. Based on the characters in Mary Shelley’s novel, Isaac Asimov explains the so-called ‘Frankenstein complex’ as a fear of artificially created beings. It refers to a modernised fear of robotisation, that is, man’s fear of androids, which, in themselves, will not bring harm to people, yet the latter’s ignorance and insecurity cause confrontations that may prove detrimental to humankind.

Undoubtedly, Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* is one of the most representative examples of a literary myth, which, through its numerous film adaptations, echoes in contemporary imagination until this day. In the scientific domain, its current reflection is found in experiments, such as genetic modifications, cloning, artificial intelligence, as well as other monstrous inventions, fatal to humanity. The monster that Frankenstein creates is timeless and spaceless; it still lurks and fuels fear...

Translated by: Marija Spirkovska

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