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Frankenstein

STUDY GUIDE

The First Science Fiction Novel— Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

by Isaac Asimov

The day came, when the first science fiction novel was written and published.

To be sure, stories had been written, centuries before, that, in hindsight, *seemed* to be science fiction. We might even consider Homer's tales of one-eyed giants, and of witches, to have been science fiction of a sort. Those early tales had nothing to do with societies changed by technological advance, and it is that which is the hallmark of true science fiction.

Even stories about flights to the Moon, some of which were written eighteen centuries ago, made no use of scientific advance. People reached the Moon by means of waterspouts, or spirits, or birds, all of which were established parts of the world the writers knew. In 1657, Cyrano de Bergerac had suggested rockets as a way for reaching the Moon, but his hero didn't use them.

Right into the beginning of the 19th Century, no one thought of scientific advance as a basic ingredient in a story. That's not surprising since, until the beginning of the 19th Century, science advanced very slowly and its relationship to ordinary life was never obvious to the general population. But then came those applications of science and technology that led to the Industrial Revolution, and people began to sit up and take notice.

In 1771, an Italian anatomist, Luigi Galvani, noticed that the muscles of dissected frog legs twitched wildly when a spark from a static electric machine happened to strike them, or when a metal scalpel touched them while such a machine was in operation, even if the sparks made no direct contact. Eventually, he discovered that frog leg-muscles would twitch in the complete absence of electric sparks anywhere, if they made contact with two different metals, such as iron and brass, at the same time. Then, in 1800, another Italian scientist, Count Alessandro Volta, showed that two different metals could serve as the source of an electric current.

What it all came to was that electricity, the study of which had entered high gear only in the previous half-century, had some mysterious but apparently intimate connection with life. People even began to speculate on the possibility of the scientific creation of life.

In 1816, Lord Byron was relaxing on the shores of Lake Geneva, having fled England and a horrible marriage. With him was another great poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, who had fled England with his 19-year-old mistress, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. (They married at the end of the year after the first Mrs. Shelley committed suicide.) Others came to share the delights of witty conversation.

Byron was interested, in a dilettantish way, in science, and knew of the work of Galvani and Volta. It seemed to the company, as they conversed, that it would be an excellent idea to write scientific romances and, in their enthusiasm, all agreed to try their hand at it. None of them actually produced anything except Mary. During a sleepless night, she thought of the creation of life--of a huge manlike object showing the first signs of life. She sat down to write, and in 1818, her book *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, was published. The hero was Victor Frankenstein who, like Galvani, was an anatomist, but who advanced beyond Galvani by infusing life into a whole body rather than into an isolated muscle and doing so permanently rather than transiently.

There had been tales of dead objects endowed with life in the past, even man-like objects. Always, however, the life-source had been magic or the supernatural. The tale of the sorcerer's apprentice infusing life into a broomstick is an example. Jewish folklore tells of the Golem, created by the 16th Century Rabbi Low of Prague, and that was done by the use of the ineffable name of God.

MARY SHELLEY

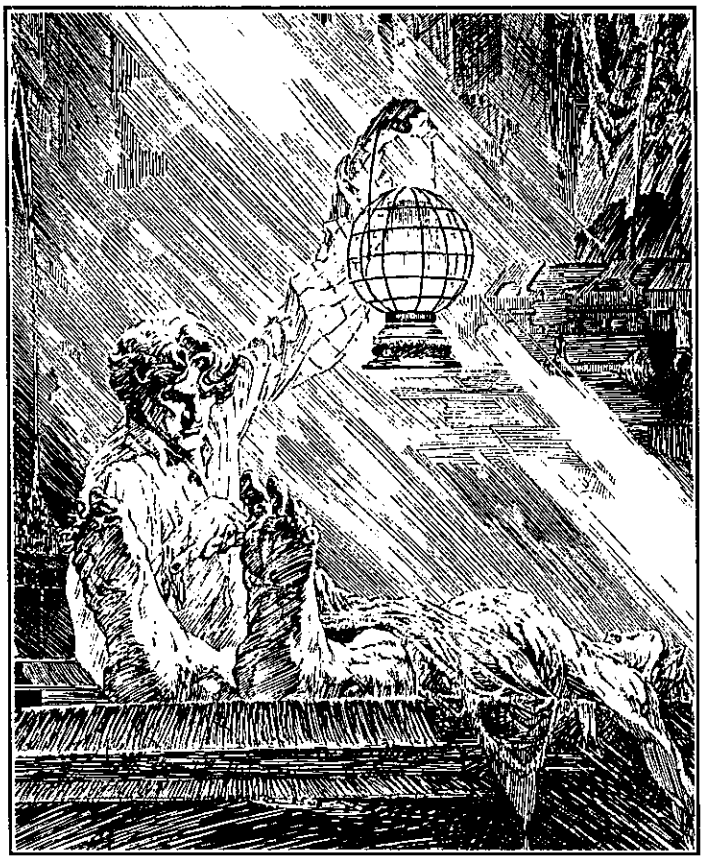
Mary Shelley was the first to make use of a new finding of science which she advanced further to a logical extreme and it is that which makes *Frankenstein* the first true science fiction novel.

What's more, it caught the popular fancy and started Mary Shelley on her literary career. The popularity of the tale has never died. The tragedy of the unnamed Monster which Frankenstein had created, a Monster which found that its hideous mien brought it only misery, and the revenge it took on the man who gave it existence but not happiness, has remained in our minds for nearly two centuries. We still call any person destroyed by his own acts, "a Frankenstein," and those acts, "a Frankenstein monster."

Excerpts From the Private Journals of Dr. Victor Frankenstein

NOVEMBER & DECEMBER, 1815

Created by Paul Frellick, Directing Associate



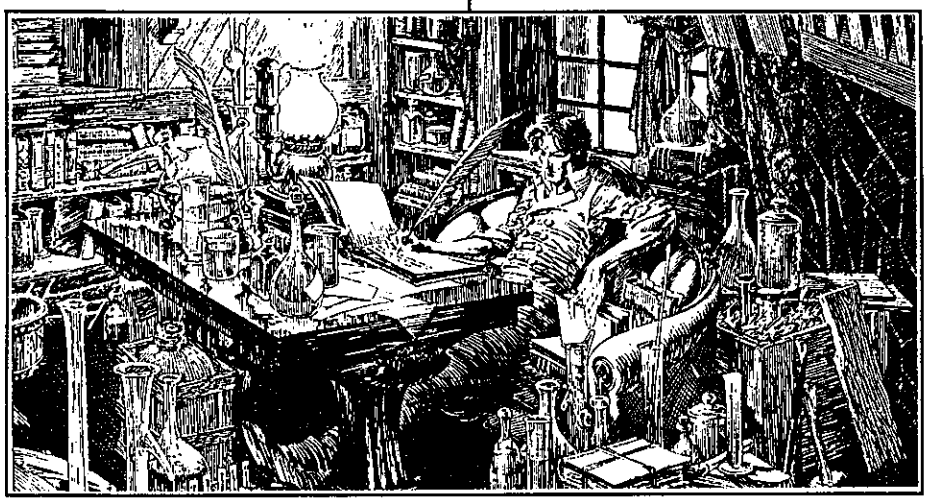
It has been some time since that fateful night which forever changed my life, yet even now my hands tremble as I attempt to chronicle its events in my journal. Time, I'm afraid, holds little meaning for me now; I can no longer bother to date these entries. That night in my laboratory is my only point of reference. Before it, I was another man, another Victor Frankenstein; what I have become since, I am afraid to discover.

That night was to have been the occasion for a magnificent triumph, the result of months of experimentation, sketches and careful calculations. I had, with the aid of my never-quite-trusted servant Igor, assembled a being from the parts of Zurich's dead bodies--the thick legs of a bricklayer, the broad chest of an iron worker, the largely unused brain of my former professor. I used only the most perfect specimens, large and powerful, for I was preparing to accomplish that which only God had accomplished before: I was about to create a man.

I had visitors that night, visitors I would have welcomed gladly on any other occasion: Henry Clerval, my fellow student from Paris, now a doctor at the Zurich asylum; Elisabeth, my adopted cousin and the only thing of beauty in my cold, analytic life; Justine, a young, unmarried mother whom my father had taken in to run his house; and her son, Wilhelm, a quick-witted boy with a spirit his tiny frame could barely contain. That night, however, I hurried them from my laboratory, for the storm I awaited was approaching--a storm that would provide the electrical spark that would bring my creation to life.

Bolts of lightning hit the castle and were channelled directly into the being's body. At first nothing happened. I could hear no heartbeat, and I assumed the experiment had failed. But suddenly my creature, my Adam, rose from the depths of my imagination to tower over me, its face and limbs hideously distorted from the electrical blast. He had seemed so perfect, lying tranquilly on the table, but now he was a demon, a creature escaped from a nightmare, his eyes aflame with the fires of hell.

Those eyes are the last thing I remember. Henry told me later I was unconscious when he found me and that the monster had been blown apart in the course of the experiment. I want desperately to believe him, but I am haunted by a shadowy fear. I have been away from Zurich, at my father, the Burgermeister's house for many days, but still I see the monster's face at the window, feel his hand on my shoulder, hear his step behind me. I cannot escape the conviction that the monster lives!



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I am recovering rapidly here under Elisabeth's care. It will be Christmas soon, and in the excited eyes of young Wilhelm I see the spark of life I foolishly tried to create in my laboratory. I believe that the time has come to give Willy the watch I promised him so long ago, the watch my father gave me when I first decided to become a doctor. And one day Wilhelm will pass it on to one of his descendants--some smiling, wide-eyed thing, fascinated by the "tic-tic" of the gears in the golden casing.

There has been tragedy in this house, although my father and Elisabeth do not tell me of it. I hear the talk in the corridors. Berta, the cook, has never whispered in her life, and I could not have received a more complete account of the event had she been sitting next to my bed displaying illustrations. One of the

scullery maids, Marie, has lost her baby. Apparently a wolf got into the house and killed it, and now Marie herself has fallen ill. Of course, Berta is up to her old suspicions again. She knows Justine's mother was hanged as a murderer, and she believes Justine has inherited her mother's macabre talents.

I must go now to see Elisabeth. Between conducting the financial affairs of the House of Frankenstein and caring for me, she has exhausted herself. She must rest, for soon her wedding day approaches; yes, I have asked her at last to marry me, and she has agreed. I wish Henry were here to help me convince her to relax, but I am told he is staying at the old mill outside of the village. What he could want up there, I cannot imagine. The place contains nothing but the remnants of the scientific experiments I conducted as a boy. Yet there he remains, leaving only to visit Marie in the hospital. Such obsessive behavior, I well understand, often accompanies scientific pursuit. But what is he pursuing?

* * * * *

My worst fears now pale in comparison with the terrors reality has shown me. The monster walks, he is alive, and that hunchbacked fiend Igor has brought him to me. He cries for a friend, for love and compassion, but how can I give him these things? Igor has taught him to kill--first Marie's baby, then young Wilhelm, and the next victim will be Elisabeth.

I have no choice but to give my Adam an Eve. I have three days. There is no time to explain to Henry the purpose of creating this woman, no time to save Justine from the madness which brought her to confess to Wilhelm's murder, no time to reassure Elisabeth that all will one day be well. My only solace is the monster's promise that he will take his bride into the mountains and never return. Only the hope that I will one day be free of this curse enables me to continue to work.

I sleep fitfully, dreaming of horrors that are perilously close to truth. Last night I dreamt of Henry, nearly insane, ready to kill our Berta in order to secure a head for the monster's bride. I called a halt to our experiment, but the monster swore revenge. I had taken his bride from him, so he kidnapped Elisabeth. I pursued them into the silent, snow-capped mountains, willing to do whatever was necessary to save Elisabeth. But would the monster accept anything from me now, even love? I shouted for him to stop, realizing too late that my voice had started an avalanche. The monster turned toward me, his eyes all the more chilling, for they were filled not with anger, but with sorrow. The rumbling wall of snow hurtled toward us--and I awoke in a cold sweat.

I do not know what the future holds. I am convinced, though, that my destiny will forever be darkened by the shadow of the monster I have created, a being both human and inhuman, innocent and guilty, terrifying and terrified-- a creature, in short, very like myself.

Frankenstein, or the Divided Self

This article, written by IRT's Artistic Director Tom Haas, tells us how he approached Mary Shelley's director and co-playwright of IRT's production of FRANKENSTEIN

In the summer of 1816, we visited Switzerland and became the neighbours of Lord Byron. . . . But it proved a wet, ungenial summer, and incessant rain often confined us for days to the house. Some volumes of ghost stories fell into our hands. . . . "We will each write a ghost story," said Lord Byron, and his proposition was acceded to.

I busied myself to think of a story . . . one which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror--one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart. If I did not accomplish these things, my ghost story would be unworthy of its name. . . .

Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these, various philosophical doctrines were discussed, and among others the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated. . . . Perhaps a corpse could be reanimated; galvanism had given token of these things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and enbued with vital warmth.

Night waned upon this talk, and even the witching hour had gone by before we retired to rest. When I placed my head on my pillow I did not sleep . . . . I saw, with shut eyes, the pale student of unhallowed arts beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and . . . show signs of life and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion.

I opened my eyes in terror. . . . Swift as light and as cheering was the idea that broke in upon me. "I have found it! What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow." On the morrow I announced that I had thought of a story.

Thus writes Mary Shelley of the birth of her titanic novel, FRANKENSTEIN. In this summer of 1816, Mary, the nineteen-year-old daughter of feminist Mary Wollestonecraft and political philosopher William Godwin, was living with her lover (later to become her husband) Percy Bysshe Shelley, one of the age's greatest romantic poets. A complex man, a divided being, the full title of Mary's ghost story FRANKENSTEIN: or THE MODERN PROMETHEUS might well describe her husband, for Shelley himself possessed the full romantic capacity for creation and destruction.

The legend of Prometheus comes from Greek mythology and is told in the play by Wilhelm:

In the early, early days, the Gods and Titans lived alone upon Olympus. And they were secure, unthreatened. All except Prometheus, who looked down and saw the earth. Idle. Full of

Continued on next page

possibilities, unexplored. And he got an idea. He would make a creature, unlike any other. One who would not merely live in the world, dumb, uncomprehending, but would tame it, plumb its mysteries and ferret out its secrets. So he went to the delta of the Nile, scooped up the clay from the banks, and he fashioned man. And taught him to plow and build and weave. He gave him the alphabet. He stole fire from Olympus to keep him warm. And he said to the gods: "See what I have made! He is not so strong as the elephant, or so swift as the cheetah. But he has within him the divine spark, and he will strive to be our equal. He will do great deeds, and never deign to be our slave! His form is the most beautiful, his intellect the greatest, his spirit indomitable!

What young Wilhelm leaves out of this glowing retelling of the Prometheus legend is Zeus's punishment of Prometheus for daring to create man without the permission of the gods. Zeus had Prometheus chained to a rocky crag on a mountain, where vultures came to feed from his flesh.

The Prometheus story was a popular one among the group assembled at Lake Leman in Switzerland that summer of 1816: Byron was in the midst of writing his poem, "Prometheus," and Shelley was about to write one of his most famous poems, "Prometheus Unbound" based on the legend. Mary Shelley's Prometheus, Victor Frankenstein, fashions his new man not out of clay, but out of the parts of dead bodies.

There are two distinct literary antecedents to Mary Shelley's novel. First the tradition of Gothic fiction which focused on the terrors of young maidens lost in gloomy castles, forbidding woods or brooding and sinister streets.

The second of Mary Shelley's literary influences is the great narrative poem tradition, particularly as contained in Milton's "Paradise Lost" and Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." The fall of Milton's Satan from heaven, as seen by Percy Bysshe Shelley, was similar to the fall of Prometheus: both, according to Shelley, were misunderstood heros. The epigraph to FRANKENSTEIN is a quote from "Paradise Lost":

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mould me Man, did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?

Gene Wilder and Peter Boyle in Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein*

Lines from Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" are used in the play to represent Victor Frankenstein's never-ending guilt over creating the monster:

Like one that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on
And turns no more his head
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.

Finally, at the end of Mary Shelley's novel and our play, Victor Frankenstein realizes that the monster is his responsibility--the responsibility of the Creator for the created. The movement of the play is in bringing these two sides of the same coin--the Creator and his monster creation--together.

FRANKENSTEIN has proved a tremendously successful vehicle for stage and screen: since it was first published in 1818 it has been adapted more than 40 times, for the stage (in both melodramas and comic spoofs), for films (in both serious horror treatments and parodies) and even for television. It is obviously a story that attracts many people. As playwright Karel Capek writes: "Nothing is more strange to man than his own image."

Anyone who decides to adapt Mary Shelley's novel today is certainly influenced by the many movie versions we have all seen: from the classic 1931 Boris Karloff version to Mel Brooks' 70's spoof, YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN. Most audience members are very familiar with these movie versions and haven't read the novel and any adaptor must take that into account. In essence, an adaptor can have a heyday exploring all the possible Frankenstein plots there are floating around among the stage and film versions!

My collaborator, Bob Gross, and I were struck with the idea of writing a new stage adaptation of FRANKENSTEIN about a year ago.

During the winter of 1987, each of us created a scenario of stage action--the most lasting version was in four scenes: the birth of the Creature, the abduction of Victor's fiancee, the creation of the bride, and the destruction of the Creature. This scenario was drastically altered and expanded during the course of the actual writing. The story was to be set in the years following Napoleon's rise to power (an event which terrorized Mary Shelley as a child).

On Memorial Day weekend Bob and I met in Ithaca, New York, where Bob was teaching at Cornell, to begin the actual writing. For four days each of us took a section of the story and wrote out the scenes in dialogue. I wrote in miniscule longhand, Bob wrote on an Apple II computer. Soon we recognized that the scene between Frankenstein and the Creature would form the crux of the play.

On July 27th we convened in Indianapolis to have the script read by various members of IRT's administrative staff (there being no actors on staff in the summer). Hearing it read out loud taught us much about the story line. Clerval, for instance, took on a new life and identity after the reading, changing from a village priest to Victor's fellow scientist. Elisabeth finally sprang to life, becoming a woman of business in the House of Frankenstein.

Work on a new script is always fine-tuned in rehearsal--as I write this in the second week of rehearsal, I'm doing rewrites every day and no doubt will continue to do so right up to Opening Night--I feel a little like Victor Frankenstein, creating a monster of a script! We think that when you come to the theatre and see our production of FRANKENSTEIN you'll realize something about why almost 200 years after it was written, the legend of Frankenstein still haunts our dreams.