

MARY SHELLEY

FRANKENSTEIN

Reference site: http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/frankenstein/frank_modern_1.html

Here you find some quotations from *Frankenstein* and relative explanations. Read them and then answer the questions you find at the bottom.

Paradise Lost

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay

To mould me man? Did I solicit thee

From darkness to promote me?

Lines from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

From the title page of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, 1818

In *Frankenstein*, the intelligent and sensitive monster created by Victor Frankenstein reads a copy of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which profoundly stirs his emotions. The monster compares his situation to that of Adam. Unlike the first man who had "come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature," Frankenstein's creature is hideously formed. Abandoned by Victor Frankenstein, the monster finds himself "wretched, helpless, and alone."

The Spark of Life

I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak . . . and so soon as the dazzling light vanished the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump. . . . I eagerly inquired of my father the nature and origin of thunder and lightning. He replied, "Electricity."

Victor Frankenstein to Robert Walton

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus, 1818

In Mary Shelley's day, many people regarded the new science of electricity with both wonder and astonishment. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley used both the new sciences of chemistry and electricity and the older Renaissance tradition of the alchemists' search for the elixir of life to conjure up the Promethean possibility of reanimating the bodies of the dead.

Unveiling the Recesses of Nature

The modern masters promise very little. . . . but these philosophers. . . have indeed performed miracles. . . . They have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows.

Professor Waldman to his class at the University of Ingolstadt

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus, 1818

By the early nineteenth century, philosophers like physician Erasmus Darwin and chemist Humphry Davy, both well known to Mary Shelley, pointed the way to mastery of the physical universe. Discoveries about the human body and the natural world promised the dawn of a new age of medical power, when such things as reanimation of dead tissue and the end of death and disease seemed within reach

Poor, Helpless, Miserable Wretch

But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses; or if they had, all my past life was now a blot, a blind vacancy in which I distinguished nothing. From my earliest remembrance I had been as I then was in height and proportion. I had never yet seen a being resembling me. . . . What was I?

The Monster

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus, 1818

Mary Shelley gave her monster feelings and intelligence. Fatherless and motherless, the monster struggles to find his place in human society, struggles with the most fundamental questions of identity and personal history. Alone, he learns to speak, to read, and to ponder "his accursed origins." All the while, he suffers from the loneliness of never seeing anyone resembling himself.

Remaining Silent

I paused when I reflected on the story I had to tell. A being whom I myself had formed, and endued with life, had met me at midnight among the precipices. . . . I well knew that if any other had communicated such a relation to me, I should have looked upon it as the ravings of insanity. Besides, the strange nature of the animal would elude all pursuit, even if I were so far credited as to persuade my relatives to commence it. . . . I resolved to remain silent.

Victor Frankenstein

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus, 1818

Abandoned by his creator, the monster takes his revenge on Victor Frankenstein by killing his younger brother, William. Frankenstein's silence, in the face of the monster's murderous actions, exacts a terrible price. His self-imposed isolation from society mirrors the social isolation the monster experiences from all who see him. Frankenstein's decision to remain silent about the monster leads to further tragedy.

A Monstrous Mate

I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself. . . . It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another. Our lives will not be happy, but they will be harmless, and free from the misery I now feel. Oh! my creator, make me happy; let me feel gratitude toward you for one benefit! Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing; do not deny me my request!

The Monster to Victor Frankenstein

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus, 1818

Victor Frankenstein initially agrees to create a mate for his monster. But as Frankenstein begins to assemble an Eve for his Adam, he grows terrified by the prospect that this female creature will be "ten thousand times more malignant" than her companion, and that the two might themselves produce

"a race of devils." Breaking his promise to the monster, Frankenstein disposes of the body parts he gathered to produce the female creature. Inflamed with hatred, the monster sets out to destroy in Frankenstein's life all that he coveted for his own. After killing Clerval, Frankenstein's best friend, the monster murders Elizabeth, Frankenstein's bride, on their wedding night.

The Greatness of His Fall

The forms of the beloved death flit before me, and I hasten to their arms. Farewell, Walton! Seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed.

Victor Frankenstein to explorer Robert Walton
Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus, 1818

As he lies dying aboard Walton's ship, Frankenstein offers an ambivalent assessment of his own conduct. In both the subtitle (*The Modern Prometheus*) of her novel and through Frankenstein's dying words, Mary Shelley suggests that Frankenstein's misfortune did not arise from his Promethean ambition of creating life, but in the mistreatment of his creature. Frankenstein's failure to assume responsibility for the miserable wretch he fathered in his workshop is his real tragedy.

Monstrous Remorse

Once I falsely hoped to meet with beings, who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of bringing forth. I was nourished with high thoughts of honour and devotion. But now vice has degraded me beneath the meanest animal. . . . the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil. . . . I am quite alone.

The Monster to explorer Robert Walton
Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus, 1818

Encountering Robert Walton aboard his ship, the monster expresses overwhelming remorse for his frightful catalogue of misdeeds, the deaths of William, Clerval, Elizabeth, and his creator. The creature informs the explorer that he will destroy himself in the frozen north, and disappears in the icy waves. The tragedy of Frankenstein and his monster is complete.

Prepare a class discussion about the novel.

- What did Victor Frankenstein want to accomplish and why?
- What did Mary Shelley seem to think about Frankenstein's ambitions?
- What do you think of Frankenstein's goals - and his ego?
- Do you sympathize with, say, Frankenstein himself? Or with the Monster? Above all, how did you like the storytelling that took place here?
- Consider the way the story is told. The outer frame is formed by letters and (toward the end) notes of Captain Walton, writing to his sister. The major inner frame consists of Frankenstein's narrative to Captain Walton. Then we have the most inward space of the inner frame, the tale told by the Monster to Victor Frankenstein, and reported to Walton. Discuss the character of this kind of narration. What if the whole story had been recounted to us directly by Frankenstein himself? How would that have changed the story? What do we gain by the technique Mary Shelley uses?

- f. Why did Shelley subtitle her book "Modern Prometheus"? Which character resembles Prometheus? Is Frankenstein a stubborn defender of mankind, fighting even against God for the good of mankind? If Victor is not a true "Promethean," why do you think Shelley chose the subtitle she did?
- g. Think of other figures—either real or fictional—who have paid a high price "angering the gods" for the good of mankind. Marie Curie might be a good example for you to lead off with.

Example that she was a Nobel Prize winning scientist whose research allowed for the development of X-ray diagnostics, but she died of cancer caused by radiation exposure. Ask students whether they think such "Prometheans" deserve punishment or not. Did Victor Frankenstein deserve his punishment?

Further Discussion Questions

1. Some scholars have used Frankenstein as a central piece in their argument against the development of cloning technology. Others argue that the problem was not with Victor Frankenstein's scientific methods but with his responses to his creation—that we should develop cloning technology, but use it wisely. Debate whether the novel is either "for" or "against" cloning. Support your argument with passages from the book.
2. One of the tragedies of Frankenstein is the refusal of other characters in the novel to recognize the monster as a full human being. Brainstorm a list of the qualities that make us human. Which of these qualities does the monster have? Which does he not have?
3. Discuss the role that nature plays in Shelley's novel. Include examples that support your answer.
4. Analyze Mary Shelley's use of setting throughout the novel. Why, for example, does she use the Arctic as the setting for Victor Frankenstein's final confrontation with his creation?

If you like, here are some links which you may find useful

<http://web.quipo.it/frankenstein/>

<http://home-1.worldonline.nl/~hamberg/>