

Shelley's *Frankenstein* in Text and Image

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STANCHION TEXT:

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the first printing of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's first novel, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Shelly began writing the novel when she was eighteen years old, in 1816, after a visit to Lake Geneva with her lover and future husband Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron. Both men were highly influential figures in the Romantic literary movement in England, which itself was an inspiration to Mary Shelley and her writing. While at the lake, Shelley had a "waking dream" in which she imagined Victor Frankenstein bringing his monster to life. Two years later, her nightmare became a story that has fixated and entranced readers ever since.

Today, *Frankenstein* continues to influence and captivate generations of readers and writers. Over the last several centuries, the book has been called a Gothic novel, an important text of the Romantic movement, and even the first true science fiction story. The character of the monster, in particular, has endured numerous interpretive representations, each one saying more about the culture in which it appears than the monster himself. This exhibit is both an exploration of the novel's influence on society but also the texts and works that influenced its creator.

CASE ONE:

Mary Shelley was born 1797 to Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. Mary's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was a powerful advocate for women's rights and is best known for her novel *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792. Her mother died a month after Mary was born and she was raised and educated by her father, a political philosopher who became influential in the late 1700s and early 1800s for his attacks on aristocratic privilege and his support for anarchism. These positions gained him a following of radicals in London who were discontent with the excesses of the aristocracy; among them was a young poet and major English Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley.

It isn't hard to imagine that the works of Godwin, Shelley, Wollstonecraft, and other philosophical and political figures of the day must have left an impression on the developing mind of a young intelligent woman. The feminist heritage of her mother, combined with the politically chaotic ideas of her father, were further developed during her interactions with the Romantics. Whether the themes she promotes in *Frankenstein* are a continuation of those ideas or a refutation of them is up for debate; what is evident is that Shelley's work owes a debt to the exciting literary, political, and scientific ideas that were in play during the years when she was drafting her novel.

Mary Wollstonecraft. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Boston, Mass.: 1792. 1st American edition. [Rare HQ1596 .W6 1792a c.3](#)

This is the first American edition of Wollstonecraft's groundbreaking work, in which she argued that women should be educated in order to give them the opportunity to contribute to society. She also emphasized the need for women to exercise rational thought in addition to refining their emotional

sensibility. Years later, her husband would educate their daughter in a manner that likely would have met with her approval.

Percy Bysshe Shelley to William Godwin, 3 May 1816. *Letters from Percy Bysshe Shelley to William Godwin*. London: Privately printed, 1891. [Rare PR5431 .A3 1891 vols. 1-2](#)

Percy Shelley was in regular correspondence with his friend and eventual father-in-law, William Godwin, often about financial difficulties of one kind or another. In this particular letter, Shelley mentions that he is leaving England, perhaps for good, and is taking Mary to Geneva, where the idea of *Frankenstein* would first appear.

William Godwin. *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*. Philadelphia: Bioren and Madan, 1796. 1st American edition. [Rare JC176 .G83](#)

This important text, written by Mary's father only a year after her birth and during the French Revolution, is the first to present his theory of how an anarchist state might succeed. This work was originally published in England in 1793 and quickly became a popular response to the French Revolution, making Godwin a famous intellectual figure.

William Wordsworth. *Lyrical Ballads*. London: J. & A. Arch, 1798. 1st edition. [Val 825W89 S712](#)

William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge are considered to be the co-founders of the Romantic literary movement, which had a profound effect on Percy and Mary Shelley as well as Byron and others. This small volume was a joint publication between the two poets, contains the first appearance of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey."

George Gordon, Lord Byron. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. London: John Murray, 1812. 1st edition. [Fields 12](#)

Byron's titular hero in this poem is the first example of the Byronic hero, an intelligent and sophisticated person who indulges in self-destructive behavior and is contemptuous of authority. Echoes of the Byronic hero can be seen in the character of Victor Frankenstein.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Prometheus Unbound*. London: C. & J. Ollier, 1820. 1st edition. [Hickmott 322](#)

This play, written several years after the publication of *Frankenstein*, engages with a sympathetic theme: Prometheus is punished for rebelling against the powers that be and giving fire to mankind. However, unlike Aeschylus's original telling of this story, Shelley's drama ends with Jupiter falling from power and Prometheus gaining his freedom. Although Shelley's tale is an overtly political allegory, and *Frankenstein* doesn't seem to engage with such topics, the character of Victor seems to resonate with Prometheus in his desire to buck tradition and the will of the authorities in his pursuit of the spark of life.

CASE TWO:

Given Shelley's lineage, husband, and social circle, it should come as no surprise that books are as important to her characters as they were to her. Early in the novel, Victor Frankenstein falls under the influence of alchemical and pseudo-scientific writings that he later denounces when at university

in favor of studying life sciences. However, it is possible to see alchemy, life science, and Victor's eventual discovery of the secret of reanimation as stages in the development of the field of science.

In contrast, Frankenstein's monster turns to literature as a means of understanding the world around him. In Victor's abandoned coat pocket, he discovers several texts that Victor must have been reading but, curiously, had never mentioned. Among them are John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Die Lieder des Jungen Werthers*, and Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*. These texts constitute a virtual required reading list for anyone interested in the Romantic literary movement.

Frankenstein's influences

Paracelsus. *Of the Nature of Things*. London: Richard Cotes for Thomas Williams, 1650. [Rare QD27 .P37](#)

Paracelsus was a Swiss physician, alchemist, and astrologer of the German Renaissance who is often compared to Martin Luther in his disdain for conventional medical practice. He was a pioneer in the use of chemicals and minerals in medicine and was also regarded as a prophet and diviner by his more fanatical followers.

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. *De Occulta Philosophia*. Cologne: 1533. 1st edition. [Rare BF1598.A3 O4 1533](#)

Agrippa was a German physician, theologian, and occult writer who was born in near Cologne in 1486. His *De Occulta Philosophia* is regarded as his magnum opus; in it, Agrippa argues for a synthetic or unified theory of magic that consists of the natural world and spiritual forces working in tandem.

Collection of Tracts relating to Astrology and Alchemy. [17th century]. [Codex 001937](#)

Alchemy and astrology are often seen as the precursors to chemistry and astronomy. Still, alchemy as a viable science fell by the wayside in the late modern period, when the scientific method won out. However, a distinction between alchemy and chemistry wasn't established in Europe until the early 1700s, and alchemy experienced a 19th-century rebirth as an occult science. Numerous influential authors related to alchemy or its vilification fill the pages of this book, including Ramón Llull, Thomas Aquinas, and Albertus Magnus, who had a strong influence on a young Victor Frankenstein.

The Monster's Library

John Milton. *Paradise Lost: A Poem Written in Ten Books*. London: Walker, 1667. 1st Edition. [Rare PR3560 1667](#)

John Milton. *Paradise Lost: A Poem in Twelve Books*. London: Johnson et al, 1808. [Bindings 134](#)

John Milton's epic poem about the Fall of Man, resulting in the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, was seen by the Romantics as a celebration of the character of Satan. Shelly,

Byron, and others saw Satan not as the embodiment of evil but as a rebellious hero who dared to defy the tyrannical rule of God. In *Frankenstein*, it's tempting to interpret Victor Frankenstein at times as Satan, Adam, or even God. Ultimately, his actions result in the destruction of everything he loves, echoing the sin of the first humans that led to their rejection. The monster sees himself in Satan, who is cast out by his creator, and also longs for the relationship with Victor that Adam initially shared with God.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers*. Leipzig: In der Weygandschen Buchhandlung, 1774. 1st edition. [Rare PT1973 .A2 1774](#)

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. *The Sorrows of Werther*. Transl. William Render. Concord, NH: Jacob B. Moore, 1824. [NH Concord 1824c](#)

This epistolary novel by Goethe, who is perhaps better known as the author of the play *Faust*, was his first published work. In the novel, the protagonist Werther is caught up in a hopeless love triangle and eventually decides to kill himself so that his love and her husband can be free and happy. The success of the book provided Goethe with international renown and was a foundational text of the German *Sturm und Drang* literary period that had an impact on the English Romantics.

Plutarch. *Lives*. London: Field, 1603. [Fields 45](#)

Plutarch's work is a collection of biographies of famous and important men. His aim in writing the text was not historical but ethical, as he wished to explore the influence of character on the lives and fortunes of great men of Rome and Greece. From Plutarch, the monster learns about human society and how humankind can be both brutal and just.

CASE THREE:

Frankenstein through time

The current incarnation of Frankenstein's monster, which has been made popular by Boris Karloff's rendition in movies, Halloween costumes, and even breakfast cereal, is one that is immediately recognizable to most of us raised in the West. The influence of Shelley's *Frankenstein* persists in Western culture today through parodies, popular reimaginings, and also new printed editions of the novel that suggest that the text is now a part of the Western canon.

Why has Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and the character of the monster, endured in popular culture for so many years? One scholar, Susan Tyler Hitchcock, has argued that the novel employs two "archetypal myths that are essentially human": one that rewards people for taking risks and crossing boundaries, and one that punishes those who transgress societal norms and stray too far into the unknown. We as humans are fascinated with our capacity for discovery and invention, but we are also fearful of losing control.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. *Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus*. London: Colburn & Bentley, 1831. [Rare PR 5397 .F7 1831](#)

This is the first illustrated edition of *Frankenstein*, published in November 1831. The engravings were made by Theodor Von Holst, the son of Russian immigrants to England who was a graduate of the Royal Academy and a protégé of the artist Henry Fuseli. Some people argue that Fuseli's 1781 painting *The Nightmare* must have had some influence on Shelley's novel.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. *Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus*. New York: The Limited Editions Club, 1934. [Presses W165sh](#)

This beautiful edition of *Frankenstein* includes an introduction by Edmund Lester Pearson and illustrations by Everett Henry. Printed for the members of The Limited Editions Club, it is one of only fifteen hundred copies made.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. *Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus*. West Hatfield, Mass.: Pennyroyal, 1983. [Presses P372she](#)

Pennyroyal Press was established by artist and scholar Barry Moser in 1970 and, with his pressman Harold McGrath, quickly gained a reputation for quality within letterpress community. The Pennyroyal edition of *Frankenstein* contains fifty-two wood engravings by Moser, who remarked in 1986 the book was his favorite production to date.

W. Scott Darling. *The Ghost of Frankenstein*. Universal, 1941. [Scripts 931](#)

The movie "The Ghost of Frankenstein" was released in 1942 as the fourth in a series produced by Universal Studios and based loosely upon characters from Shelley's novel. Lon Chaney, Jr., took over the role of the monster from Boris Karloff while Bela Lugosi, more famously known for playing Dracula, reprised his role as Igor. This movie was the first to relegate the Frankenstein movie series to "B-movie" status.