

Romantic politics: writing politics in mary shelley's 'frankenstein' and the poet...

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



Revolution was a key idea to the philosophy of the Romantic writers, whether it be social, cultural or aesthetic. It is in the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley, however, that the most overt revolutionary political statements are made while *Frankenstein*, the masterpiece novel by his wife Mary, interacts with politics through innumerable layers and allegory. Through their work, politics and literature become intertwined, though there are specific differences in how this connection is made in their contrasting works.

It was not in Percy Shelley's nature to turn a blind eye towards the injustice he saw in the world but he would instead directly attack those who enforced tyranny. As Paul Foot notes in his introduction to Shelley's *Revolutionary Year*, "Shelley's enormous talents were not used to butter up the rulers of society ... but to attack those rulers from every advantage point." [1] This overt political confrontation is evident in his sonnet 'England in 1819' where Shelley directly attacks and criticizes the political establishment. The opening line, "An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King" serves as caricature of the monarchy, immediately setting a critical tone to the poem. [2] Later in the poem Shelley calls the British government "Rulers who neither see nor feel nor know", [Line 4] demonizing Parliament as well as pointing out their ignorance and incompetence. Due to this strongly derogatory description of the ruling forces in Britain, Shelley sets out the Crown and government as the villains of the poem, unfit to govern over the masses, cruel and outdated figures with only their own selfish intentions at heart, as shown by "leechlike to their fainting country cling". [Line 5] But Shelley, as the poet, provides salvation for the masses, stating that the horrors of the ruling classes have become "graves from which a glorious

Phantom may / Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.” [Lines 13 – 14] It is here that Shelley presents ideas that will be further explored in his ‘ A Defence of Poetry’, that “ Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.”[3] Shelley is fully conscious that he, the poet, is calling for the masses, and thus the reader, to rise up in revolution in the final lines of ‘ England in 1819’, therefore making the poem, as a form, an overtly political instrument.

The political implications of Frankenstein, and how they interact with the text, are subtly presented by Mary Shelly. The creator and creation narrative present throughout the entire novel provides the reader with a variety of ways to engage with the text from a political angle. In one way Mary Shelley provides an allegorical exploration of the French Revolution, similar to Jane Austen in *Sense and Sensibility*. Victor Frankenstein, after creating his monster, is unable to control and contain the horror that he has released unto the world. The monster in many ways is representative of the force of the Revolution itself: he has been created from corpses, symbolic of the famine and poverty stricken French populous; he is driven by a need to enact revenge upon the cause of his pain, highlighted by almost indulgent violence; and the monster never ceases his rampage until his persecutor has lost everything and then he himself ends. The Revolution is often seen as a monstrous period in France’s history, full of new possibilities but ultimately corrupted and a failure in respect to its own goals, as is the monster to his creator. By presenting Victor Frankenstein as unable to fully understand the implications of his actions or control was he has released into the world

Shelley presents him as a representative of, as Fred Botting notes, the “revolutionary alchemists or Enlightenment philosophers whose dangerous experiments upset all order by releasing dark and chaotic forces of evil”, or, in other words, Revolutionary ideology.

Mary Shelley, in direct contrast to the position her husband takes in his poetry, presents through her work a far more hesitant attitude towards the concept of revolution, as shown by her representation of the most immediate example to her and her writing. While Percy is direct and defined in his pro-revolutionary stance, using poetry as a form of overt political expression, Mary is more subtle and hesitant in that she suggests the use of caution so as to avoid how revolution is presented in her novel. As Botting notes, the “monster forms the hideous result [of Victor Frankenstein’s allegorical actions], a revolutionary mob that cuts a wake of terror across Europe.” Mary Shelley would rather the world avoid having to face the political demon that she created in her work.

While the violence of Frankenstein is used, from one aspect, as a representation of what encompasses a revolution, both Shelleys use it as a symbol of moral decisions and a catalyst towards bettering one political philosophy. In ‘The Mask of Anarchy’, Percy Shelley uses the brutality of government forces at the Peterloo Massacre as reason for possibly one of his most unconventional and radical political ideas. Firstly, he presents the Massacre as enacted out by an apocalyptic force, including politicians such as Viscount Castlereagh, Baron Eldon and Henry Addington as members of the Four Horsemen, the final horseman being Anarchy. Anarchy, who

declares that “ I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW!” is a critical representative of all ruling powers in Britain who forces his subjects to repeat the previously mentioned phrase and thus cementing him as the omnipotent governor of the country.[1] Much like he did in ‘ England in 1819’, Shelley intentionally uses satirical elements to dehumanize the government and separate them from both himself and the reader who is assumed as sympathetic towards Shelley’s point of view. Once again, Shelley has positioned the reader in opposition to the government and thus includes them in the “ Men of England, heirs of Glory” [Line 147] who are being addressed by an unnamed “ maniac maid” [Line 86] who professes the political statements Shelley attempts to convey. These political statements revolve around the idea of a nonviolent resistance to government oppression, as the maid declares that when soldiers march upon and attack those who are protesting they will be met by people who “ Stand ye calm and resolute”. [Line 319] This passive resistance aims to make the soldiers question their own morality and sense of justice.

This new form of political dissent is important not just in how it has influenced political thinkers and activists (Henry David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi being among those inspired by the poem) but in how it shifts the political role of the poet. In contrast to ‘ England in 1819’ where Shelley presents himself as merely a critic and observer of the world, detached but still ideologically invested, ‘ The Mask of Anarchy’ involves Shelley, and thus the poet, directly with political philosophy. Shelley transcends the roles of poet and political thinker by providing a lyrical

direction for the masses, thus emphasizing his later belief that “ Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” ‘ The Mask of Anarchy’ is a clear example of how the poet and his form of expression are able to express political critique and ideology in a way that captures the imagination like no other. As Mark Kipperman states in his essay Shelley and the Ideology of the Nation, Shelley is as example of how neither “ philosophers nor kings nor social economists can so form the political, social, and moral language of a nation as can its poets.”

This idea that writers are far more able to provide political commentary can be disputed when comparing the works of Percy and Mary Shelley. While Percy is clear and direct in his condemnation and satire, Mary utilizes greater use of allegory and subtle metaphor. Due to being such a broad novel, Frankenstein can be interpreted from a wide array of critical analyses while the poetry of Percy is easily seen as political. If we are to continue interpreting the monster as representative of change, Frankenstein can be read as portraying a message similar to that of Percy’s poem ‘ Ozymandias’. Through ‘ Ozymandias’ Percy observes how nothing can repel the ravages of time and he suggests that even the British government, who seem to hold indisputably consolidated power, will one day fall, or, as the more probable option, drastically change from one outdated and tyrannical tradition into a new and fairer one.

This shift from the old tradition into the new tradition is also shown in Frankenstein. Victor Frankenstein’s narrative begins with him stating “ I am by birth a Genevese, and my family is one of the most distinguished of that

republic.”[1] It is thus immediately stated that Victor comes from a privileged background, further emphasized by his attending university abroad, his frequent travelling across Europe and his non-existent concern for financial responsibility. Victor, much like Ozymandias, is symbolic of the ruling elite of the old tradition and thus his creation represents the future: well educated despite poor beginnings, a product of science rather than superstition and physically superior. Thus, the monster's reign of terror over the life of Victor is designed to represent a shift in power from the old to the new.

This sense of change could also be interpreted from a Marxist perspective as not just a shift due to time but also a class revolution. Due to Victor's status as an aristocrat and creator it could be seen that he holds dominion over the monster, creating a master and slave image. Victor denies the monster suffrage in that he never recognizes the monster, who is intelligent, eloquent and reasonable, as an equal even close to being human. No matter what the monster does, whether it be a physical, emotional or intellectual act, Victor refuses to give him autonomy. As Franco Moretti notes, the monster “ makes us realize how hard it was for the dominant classes to resign themselves to the idea that all human beings are - or ought to be - equal.”[1] Much like the masses of the proletariat in capitalist society the monster resorts to violence. This is the only means that he is able to declare that Victor may be “ my creator, but I am your master - obey!” [Page 172] The stubbornness of the ruling classes, Shelley suggests, does not solidify their hold over society, but merely forces the masses to resort to violence.

The relationship between politics and writing, as presented by Percy and Mary Shelley, is one of intricate and important connections. There is, however, differences when the matter of form is addressed. Percy, the poet, is direct and unbashful in his political motives, while Mary, the novelist, allows her work to not be restricted by focusing on the sole topic of politics but rather be of such breadth that politics is just one subject that can be read as the novels focus among many others. This suggests that the relationship between politics and writing is often dependent on form, the novel providing far more ambiguity on the subject with poetry being more appropriate for a confident and clear argument.