

# The influence of frankenstein on the author's life and literature

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Frankenstein, recognized as one of the most famous literary works of horror ever written, was the direct result of three brilliant authors challenging themselves to create a story that would incite fear and horror in the reader. Mary Shelley and her husband Percy, along with friend and fellow writer Lord Byron, decided they would each write horror stories, read them, and declare a winner after all had been read. After a vivid dream, Mary Shelley began writing the gripping tale of Victor Frankenstein. Although the challenge by her fellow writers, along with an obscure dream, was the impetus for her writing, many specific and often tragic events throughout Mary's life greatly affected the way she shaped her novel (" Mary Shelley" 2). Frankenstein, often viewed only as the horrifying tale of a scientist gone mad, can be analyzed as being the articulation of the fears of a woman, Mary Shelley, about pregnancy, birth, and as a direct result of influences from other writers and even her own parents.

In order to thoroughly understand the influences that affected Shelley's writing, specifically Frankenstein, one must have an adequate knowledge of a few key events in Mary's life. Born on August 30, 1797, Mary Shelley was a prominent, though often overlooked, literary figure during the Romantic Era of English Literature. She was the only child of Mary Wollstonecraft, the famous feminist, and William Godwin, a philosopher and novelist (Classic Writers 199). Mary's parents were shapers of the Romantic sensibility and the revolutionary ideas of the left wing. Shortly after giving birth to Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, her mother, soon contracted puerperal fever and died. This had a profound effect on Shelley's thinking as she grew older, taking the tragic event as inspiration to become a good writer (Coulter 2).

She was also the wife of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Mary, Percy, Byron, and Keats were principle figures in Romanticism's second generation, important though short-lived as it was. Whereas the principle poets of the second generation died young in the 1820's, Mary lived through the Romantic era into the Victorian. Among her completed works are *History of Six Weeks' Tour*, written collectively with her husband, *Valperga*, a romance set in the 14th-century, and *The Last Man*, which depicts the end of human civilization, set in the 21st century (Houston and Percy 152).

From a very early age, Mary was surrounded by many powerful and influential writers, shaping her ideas as she grew and eventually leading to the writing of *Frankenstein*. The Romantics of her time were fascinated with dreams (and Gothic nightmares). Dreams were seen as predictors of what could happen or horrible recollections of what did actually take place.

Coleridge's "Kubla Khan", "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", and "The Pains of Sleep" all reflect a horrible nightmare world of what happens when the subconscious rapes the daylight (Houston and Percy 152). The romantic obsession with the imagination and the creative process undoubtedly had profound influences on *Frankenstein*. After all, Shelley got the idea for her novel from a nightmare (Coulter 3)! As a direct result of these Romantic influences, Victor himself experiences a complex dream:

"I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother

in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon... I beheld the wretch - the miserable monster whom I had created (Shelley 58)."

Thus, Shelley effectively induces this sense of a dreamlike, horrible Gothic fantasy that the writers of the Romantic period inspired in her (Woodbridge 2). This Gothic, misty world based on the idea of what dreams were interpreted as was a central theme to Shelley's writing and originated from the writing of many prominent Romantic writers of the time.

Central to the underlying theme of Shelley's Frankenstein is the complex and enlightening process of childbirth and motherhood. Incorporating the dreamlike, unrealistic setting inspired by other Romantic writers, Shelley wishes to express her views, experiences, and fears of becoming a mother. The first tragic event involving childbirth was the death of Shelley's mother shortly after giving birth to Shelley. Although despairing for her father, later in life Mary took the event as inspiration to become a better writer. Childbirth would come back to haunt Mary later in life. Her first child, Clara, was born prematurely on February 22, 1815, and died March 6. Mary, as any person would be, was devastated by this and took a long time to recover. Mary's second child, William, was born on January 24, 1816. (William died of malaria June 7, 1819.) Thus, at the time that Mary conceived of the story, her first child had died and her second was only 6 months old (Woodbridge 1-3).

There is no doubt that she expected to be pregnant again and about six

months later she was. Pregnancy and child-rearing was at the forefront of Mary's mind at this point in her life.

These experiences of childbirth undoubtedly raised, if not fear, certainly questions about childbirth and why her first child had died. As a result of her bad experiences with motherhood, Mary creates this horrid looking, asymmetrical monster who comes to ravage the countryside (Coulter 4). What is important about the monster is that not only is it hideous, but it starts out its life as a good being, only to have rejection from society and bad "parenting" on the part of Victor turn it into a thoughtless, insensitive murderer (Afterword 195). As Victor meets his creation for the first time after the death of his relatives, the monster proclaims:

"Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall be virtuous (Shelley 81-82)."

This testament of Victor's monster explains how Victor has failed. Leaving his "child" alone to wander the world with no moral support, Victor has failed miserably at being a good parent (Woodbridge 2-3). Thus, Shelley is able to express her fears of having another child die and not knowing if she will be a good parent by incorporating these themes into the miscarriage of Frankenstein's monster.

Finally, Mary was influenced greatly by her parents Mary Wollenstonecraft and William Godwin, both influential writers during their lives. Mary Wollenstonecraft is often called the “mother of feminism.” A Vindication of the Rights of Women is probably her most famous work, in which she skillfully used the pen to speak out against the mistreatment of women. Recognizing the Enlightenment thought circulating throughout society, which put reason at the center of societal thinking, she saw a stark contrast with the realities women faced in everyday life. Shelley, although she was never able to know her mother, took solace in knowing that her mother was a good writer, and that she was using that writing for a good cause (“Mary Shelley” 1-4). Although she never grew to know her mother, Mary was inspired to write by her legacy.

Shelley’s father, William Godwin, was also a famous writer. His works included An Inquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Things as They Are, or The Adventures of Caleb Williams. From an early age Godwin encouraged his daughter to put her thoughts on paper. The company he kept included many great writers of the time. Mary was influenced early in life by these writers, and as a result began to publish her work at the age of ten. Shelley was only nineteen when Frankenstein was published, and wrote throughout the rest of her life. After running away with Percy, Godwin condemned his daughter and their relationship was never fully mended (“Mary Shelley” 2-4). Godwin had a profound effect on Mary, starting her writing at an early age and thus setting the literary stage which she would perform on for the remainder of her life.

Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus, is not simply the tale of a scientist taking the intellectual bonds of man to the limit and creating life from death, but rather a communication by the author, Mary Shelley, of issues which took precedence in her life up to the time of her writing the book. Shelley had many underlying themes that she wanted the reader to pick apart, analyze them for what they are, and simply digest them. She effectively created a story that, while being an enjoyable account of a horrific monster's life, relays to the reader her fears of giving birth and not becoming a good parent, along with other concerns she had at the time. The way she approached this story was influenced mainly by other writers of the Romantic Period, chiefly Samuel Coleridge and Lord Byron, and her parents, two great writers themselves. Frankenstein was not a simple challenge by a fellow writer to write a book, but more accurately the complex compilation of an eighteen year olds' diverse life experiences.