

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: The Desire to Share the Dangerous Knowledge

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



From its outset, Frankenstein establishes a link between the procuring of knowledge, or the uncovering of secrets, and evil. Walton's sister's 'evil forebodings' that surround his attempt to reach the North Pole, pointed out in the very first sentence, signal immediately not only the dangers that accompany the pursuit of knowledge irresistible to a Romantic over-reacher like Walton (and of course like Frankenstein himself), but also that Walton is a character (again like Frankenstein) who is perhaps irresistibly drawn to danger. That the reader himself is implicated in this dangerous expedition into the unknown is made clear as we are positioned as the audience for the terrible secret that Walton, as the transcriber Frankenstein's history, is going to disclose. It has been noted that, not unlike *Paradise Lost*, a moral exploration upon which Frankenstein heavily leans, the book is one which has gone beyond the limits of its text, and is now a product of criticism, rather than a work of literature. Mary Shelley's description of the novel as her 'hideous progeny' is an indication that, quite apart from the story it tells, Frankenstein as an entity is a symbol of how a secret, once revealed, or "born", cannot be deleted, but must be allowed to continue—as the monster itself and his creator are only too painfully aware—whatever the consequences might be for its possessor.

Accompanying the sense of danger we feel surrounding the disclosure of secret knowledge is an inevitable fear of its possession. Curiosity and fear of course go hand in hand, and the latter usually does little to eradicate the former. Frankenstein is adept at inspiring both, in his preparation of Walton for the story he is about to tell:

I had determined once, that the memory of these evils should die with me; but you have won me to alter my determination. You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been... if you are inclined, listen to my tale. I believe that the strange incidents connected with it will afford a view of nature, which may enlarge your faculties and understanding... (17)

As an introduction to Frankenstein's story, the passage is loaded with clues, not least the reference to the tree of knowledge and its attendant 'serpent', that the possession of the secret—of which the reader is just as expectant as Walton—is not going to be beneficial. Frankenstein's unnecessary, 'if you are inclined...' is surely disingenuous, as he is well aware that he has found in Walton one who is seeking knowledge at any price, 'as I once did.' Walton tells his sister that, perhaps not unsurprisingly after this seductive precursor, he is full of 'the greatest eagerness' to hear Frankenstein's tale. He is quick to point out that it is not mere 'curiosity' that prompts him to urge Frankenstein onwards in his confession, but also 'a strong desire to ameliorate his fate.' A rather dubious claim in light of the fact that he is still labeling Frankenstein 'a stranger' at this point. The phrase parallels almost exactly that used by Frankenstein after the monster has begged his creator to listen to his story: 'I was partly urged by curiosity, and compassion confirmed my resolution.'(79) Once again, 'curiosity' is the dominant motivation, with the word 'compassion' sounding a distinct note of self-justification.

Critics have often explored how the frame-narrative structure, with its Chinese-box effect leading us ever closer to a powerful kernel of truth that we never quite reach, acts as a form of seduction. Beth Newman talks about how storytelling in *Frankenstein*, 'serves as a way of seducing a listener, and as a means of displacing and sublimating a desire that cannot be satisfied directly.' A sense of the seductive quality of Frankenstein's discourse is given in Walton's description of his 'unparalleled eloquence', deployed by the 'choicest art'(15). Later, Walton gives us an image of Frankenstein as a kind of siren, luring men at sea to their deaths through the power of his words, encouraging the fearful crew of Walton's ship to continue on their fatal quest with the belief that 'these vast mountains of ice are mole-hills, which will vanish before the resolutions of man'(181).

Why then, does Frankenstein perform this almost perverse act of seduction, knowing it will only lead to heartache? The question can be answered once again by Shelley's description of her own work as her 'progeny'; the act of revelation, of sharing of knowledge, is as fundamental a human need as maternal reproduction. The novel is full of characters desperate to relate their stories to others, to unburden themselves of the weight of terrible truths. Just like Frankenstein, the monster begs that someone, 'hear my tale'(79), and just like Walton, Frankenstein is irresistibly compelled to listen. The urge to communicate is echoed again and again, right down to the gossipy communications of Elizabeth in her letters to her fiancée Frankenstein, in which she is prompted by her desire to reveal to engage in lengthy descriptions of miscellaneous parish news.

The example is of course a trivial one, but is one of the numerous devices used in the novel to highlight the difference between the blithe discourse of those able to share everything with those they love, and the miserable narrative of Frankenstein, forced to conceal secrets and hide his true emotions at every turn. The difference is most overtly highlighted in a comparison of Frankenstein and his friend, Henry Clerval, when they embark on their tour of the European sights together. Clerval is repeatedly depicted as a paradigm of human existence, ' a being formed in the " very poetry of nature"'.(130) He is also, as " Freudian" readers of the text are so fond of pointing out, one of the many " doubles" that populate Frankenstein. Frankenstein makes this explicit in his assertion that, ' in Clerval I saw the image of my former self.'(131) The implication is that Clerval is Frankenstein without knowledge. Frankenstein repeatedly characterizes all those in the novel without his knowledge as belonging to a child-like, Arcadian vision of innocence, in contrast to his own personal ' hell.' Within his sense of horror at his predicament is inherent a sense of superiority, however terrible, to those who cannot understand the cause of his suffering. Thus he responds to the advice of his father with a terse dismissal, ' though good, totally inapplicable to my case.'(70) Again and again Frankenstein is careful to point out that his grief is entirely his own possession-inaccessible to others.

Robert Kiely explains the conflicting emotions that Frankenstein feels by the fact of his being a ' genius', and thus prone to a dissonance between the human need for friendship, to share with those he loves, and ' the right of the genius to work in solitude.' That superior knowledge leads to solitude is

borne out by the events of Frankenstein's tale. But the explanation is a difficult one, as it puts forward the idea that Frankenstein earns his knowledge of the secret of human life by means of his inherent genius, rather than through the combination of his ambitious nature and the temptations of the evil branch of natural science that seems to appear fortuitously before him. At one point Frankenstein bemoans the fact that his father, after seeing that his young son had begun to stray down the path of the semi-magical natural conjurers like Agrippa and Magnus, did not 'take the pains to explain'(23) that these men's ideas were outmoded and akin to a kind of sorcery. Given this, are we to assume that the cause of Frankenstein's downfall was merely that his genius was not harnessed correctly at an earlier stage? The question is one that the novel never fully answers.

When Frankenstein details his life at the university in Ingolstadt, a possessive tone once again emerges when he points out, 'None but those who have experienced them can conceive of the enticements of science.'(33) The word 'enticements', along with allusions to 'delight and rapture' and the 'summit of my desires'(34) figure the achievement of knowledge very much as a sexually charged climax following an exercise in seduction, a formula which mirrors the act of disclosure of his story to Walton. Overt parallels, which would appear to act as obvious warning signs, occur again and again in Frankenstein, but, as Paul Sherwin has pointed out, this apparent genius remains the 'chief misreader' of his own story. Frankenstein tells Walton to 'learn from me', recognizing the 'eager' glint in

his listener's eyes and warning him, ' I will not lead you on, unguarded and ardent as I was then, to your destruction and infallible misery.'(35) And yet soon after we see him urging Walton and his crew onwards to what can only be their destruction at the North Pole, using alternating tactics of the lure of honour and glory, and the shame of being ' cowards'(183), should they turn back from their goal. This is to say nothing of the fact that Frankenstein is constantly ' leading us on' through the very act of revealing his narrative. It would appear that, even armed with what should surely be the most effective warning against the ambitious pursuit of knowledge ever created, Frankenstein is pleased to recognize and encourage in others what he calls in himself a ' fatal impulse.'(23)

The lure of forbidden knowledge is of course a classic Gothic touchstone, where it generally functions just as powerfully for the reader as it does for the character who experiences it. Caleb William's recognition of his fatal desire to learn the truth of his master's shaded past might well be addressed to a reader of Frankenstein, ' The reader will feel how rapidly I was advancing towards the brink of the precipice. I had a confused apprehension of what I was doing, but I could not stop myself.' The difference is that, while the reader is able to empathise wholeheartedly with a figure like Caleb Williams, or even an historical, romantic heroine like Emily St. Aubert in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Shelley rather pulls us away from an understanding of Frankenstein's experiences and desires. The frame narrative is a key part of this, constantly reminding us that we are learning of a horror we will only ever hear in a tale, rather than experience in real life. Charles Schug points

to this as a 'necessary' means of containing the moral experience of Frankenstein within the bounds of fiction. But the major distancing factor is that Frankenstein is grappling, not with human emotions and secret family histories, but in a realm of quasi-magical, natural scientific knowledge that we are not intended ever to attempt to comprehend. The image we are given of the university at Ingolstadt as a removed and remote place of learning, and its unfriendly professors such as M. Krempe, reinforces the sense that this kind of knowledge exists in an isolated and inaccessible arena, a world away from the happy life of relative ignorance and constant human interaction of Frankenstein's home. Frankenstein's 'workshop' is similarly marked as isolated and lonely; first in a 'solitary chamber...separated from all the other apartments'(36), and later on an almost uninhabited island off the Scottish coast.

In her portrayal of Frankenstein's and Walton's self-consciously dangerous pursuit of knowledge in the novel, Shelley is perhaps attempting to communicate something about the perils of individualistic, excessive ardour of the Romantic search for enlightenment. We cannot help but be relieved when Walton is ultimately forced to abandon his quest and make his way home to safety, despite his belief that his failure to reach the pole leaves him 'ignorant and disappointed'(184). And yet equally prominent is the parallel pull that the novel makes on our own curiosity as it pushes on towards its horrific climax, marking the desire for knowledge, however terrible, as an inescapable condition of human existence.