

Realism and metarealism in mary shelley's horror tale frankenstein essay

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Many great novels act as representations of their age and time, and of the way in which people thought of themselves in relation to their world.

Novels which are set in a particular place and time are generally involved with the major upheavals of their society, to some extent or other. The novel is capable of richly alluding to the general aspirations, perceptions, the general world-view as well as what people think they know about how the world they live in has come about. In this respect, for instance, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which are seemingly poles apart in their style and content, serve a similar purpose: the former is concerned to evaluate the currents of change of its time as much as the latter is inspired by the revolutionary developments of knowledge of the contemporary world (Walder 135). Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) certainly seems to be entirely derived from a dream or nightmare, something very unlikely to have happened to somebody in real life. True, some novels can seem to be more fictitious than others, and *Frankenstein* had been a novel in fictional category of its own. With her novel *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley, at the age of 20, in fact inadvertently invented a revolutionary whole new genre of fiction which hardly existed before her time, namely science fiction.

In this sense, *Frankenstein* may not be representative of real life, and yet it was representative of an emerging new paradigm of scientific thinking in her time, during the first decades of the nineteenth century. There is a certain degree of every-day realism in *Frankenstein* which is deftly combined with elements of a prevalent genre called Gothic, which more suited Mary Shelley's soaring imaginings. For instance, in the Gothic novel, one story is <https://assignbuster.com/realism-and-metarealism-in-mary-shelleys-horror-tale-frankenstein-essay/>

often nestled within another and large sections of the narrative come out as a tale told by one character to another. In this and many other senses, Frankenstein follows many rules and conventions typical of the Gothic genre. At the core of the novel is the story told by the “ creature” that exists within the story told by the scientist Frankenstein, which is within the story told by the explorer, Walton (Allen 63).

Yet this is no regular horror tale. Though it certainly created one of the two enduring “ monsters” of all time in English Fiction, this is not a monster tale in any real sense either. Frankenstein’s creature, though labeled a monster, cannot be considered a monster, with any true justification, on par with other popular monsters such as Dracula or Godzilla. Frankenstein’s creature is a noble savage, and if anything, is sometimes more human than most humans. For instance, in the most recent revival of Frankenstein’s creature on Hollywood Screen, he sides with the eponymous human protagonist, Van Helsing, to battle against Count Dracula and his forces of darkness. Frankenstein’s creature embodies the quintessential human spirit and human longings. In a similar way, though being part of the Gothic fantasy tradition, and the most significant harbinger of perhaps the most highly imaginative genre of fiction, besides referring to a Greek myth in its sub-title, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein embodies a little of the spirit, the longings and fears of her age.

Frankenstein’s 1818 preface makes a clear distinction between its scientific plot, which was inspired by the scientific leanings of the time, and the more easily recognized action in the vein of Gothic fiction: “ I have not considered

myself as merely weaving a series of supernatural terrors. The event on which the interest of the story depends is exempt from the disadvantages of a mere tale of spectres or enchantment. (Shelley 47)" In truth, Frankenstein's claim to originality lies in its defiant rejection of the supernatural (Alkon 2). Thus, though often regarded as a fabulous flight of fancy, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein contains a powerful dose of realism, as opposed to supernaturalism, symbolism, or pure fantasy, at its core.

But much more importantly, for the first time in the history of literature, it seeks out a new scientifically based vision of reality. By attempting to transpose the status of creator from God to man, and the secularization of the means of creation from the realm of miracles to the arena of science (Levine 27), Frankenstein offered a drastically new way of looking at our world that is devoid of supernaturalism or fantasy. Thus Frankenstein is not only a product of what is known as "realistic imagination," but presents a deeper understanding of reality more in keeping with the then rather newly emerging scientific mode of thinking. Terror remains a predominant element, an effect Mary Shelley avowedly sought to create, in the novel, yet it is by no means of a supernatural variety, as for instance in its counterpart Bram Stoker's Dracula (or even Dracula's progenitor Byron's Vampyre which was incidentally created during the same occasion that spurred the creating of Frankenstein). The fright factor in the novel is implemented through natural means involving science and human psychology. Thus, although affiliated to the accepted Gothic norms and forms of creating a "ghost story," Frankenstein's essential realism validates its claim to novelty. The fear that

Frankenstein evokes is not one of a spooky, instinctive kind, but rather of more thoughtful and plausible nature.

Frankenstein succeeds in inspiring awe and reverence for greatness of ambition, and yet at the same time instills a healthy level of fear and distrust of those who act on it rather blindly. The ambition of the novel's protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, that of recreating a living intelligent human form, may seem fantastic to us, yet it was by no means wholly outlandish by the standards of the time, the early nineteenth century being an extravagantly ambitious era when literally almost everything was considered possible by means of science. Great ambitions can succeed in the realization of great dreams, but they can also result in bringing to life unspeakable nightmares.

Thus, though Mary Shelley may have worked on to create a conspicuous element of stark horror merely for the sake of sensationalism, in conforming with the purposes of "ghost story" genre, the fears that Frankenstein gives expression to are more like warnings of consequences when great ambitions take a wrong track or are pursued without sufficient foresight. Alkon observes that: A looming problem for writers in the nineteenth century was how to achieve sublimity without recourse to the supernatural..

.. The supernatural marvels that had been a staple of epic and lesser forms from Homeric times would no longer do as the best sources of sublimity. Although ghost stories and related Gothic fantasies were to prove surprisingly viable right through the twentieth century, perhaps because they offer respite from the omnipresence of technology, writers sought new forms that could better accommodate the impact of science.

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Epics were displaced by realistic novels of quotidian life (2). . Fantasy tales normally act as a means of escape from the tyranny of every-day reality. However the advent and advancement of modern science was making the routine world that we take for granted a place of exhilarating possibilities and endless adventure. There was no need for an escape from our familiar world to seek thrill, excitement and “ sublimity” anymore. Science made our every-day world hot and happening. At the same time, the phenomenal progress and promise of science was bound to raise many fears and concerns in the thinker and common man alike, then as much as now. Frankenstein reflects the dominant theme of a quest for adventure and accomplishment, along with hopes and fears about how far we are willing to go in our relentless pursuit of scientific accomplishment.

A significant achievement of Frankenstein lies in the fact that it became a trend-setter in a movement that was to bring more style and substance based on considerations of real-life world into the art form of the novel. However the most sublime virtue of Mary Shelley's novel is that it goes beyond even realism into the world of deeper and timeless truths about human existence. The subtitle of the novel, “ The Modern Prometheus” says it all. In the summer of 1816, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin had been living with Percy Shelley for two years, going through ordeals and troubled times together. During this particular period they found themselves settled in Geneva, amidst the natural splendor of Alps, as well as in the stimulating company of Byron.

The origins of Frankenstein can be traced back to the rambling night conversations between these three, which must have presumably ranged from gothic terrors to galvanism, touching upon the prevalent theories of electricity and the origin of life. However, the fact that the three of them were to compose a major work with Prometheus in or as the title, that very same year, is a clear indicator that the myth of Prometheus and its significance should have been one of the major topics of their conversations. The subtitle of the novel Frankenstein, alluding to the myth of Prometheus, indeed holds an essential clue as to the original intent and purport of the author (Joseph v). Metarealism, for our present purposes, can be defined as the externalization of interior realities that are transformed into mystical or mythological metaphors. In this sense, transcending the particular context of its contemporary time, Frankenstein becomes a myth and a metaphor for human existence and evolution as such. Prometheus is generally portrayed as the suffering champion of mankind, but in Mary Shelley's novel, in the form of Victor Frankenstein, he becomes a creator. The vital spark of fire that Prometheus stole from gods to give it to mortals for their use, and for which he is eternally condemned, is often equated with the spark of creativity in humans.

As expressed via the means of science, our creativity can exalt us to the status of gods; at the same time, there is an intrinsic danger that it can cast us into eternal perdition. Almost two hundred years after impetuously and almost naively suggested by Mary Shelley, notwithstanding the realistic scientific garb she wanted to give it, the prospect of us humans creating synthetic and intelligent life would come very close to reality in the years to come, thanks

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not the miracles of electricity, as depicted in the novel, but to the marvels of genetic engineering. However the murder and mayhem unleashed by Frankenstein's creature could pale into utter insignificance when compared to the horrors that could be visited upon us by extremely advanced technologies of tomorrow, especially genetic engineering. The lot that fell upon Victor Frankenstein could in all probability be the fate of mankind in the near future. Mary Shelley attempted to make what was essentially a gothic fantasy sound closer to our real world, but most ironically, our real world is all poised to assume the weirdness and surrealism of a gothic fantasy if the "Victor Frankenstein" amidst us is allowed to experiment and pursue his scientific ambitions wantonly. Unfortunately, there does not seem any way to stop him, because stopping him would mean the ending of progress. Our own progress leading to our own perdition, perhaps that is the ultimate tragedy and horror of humankind.

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