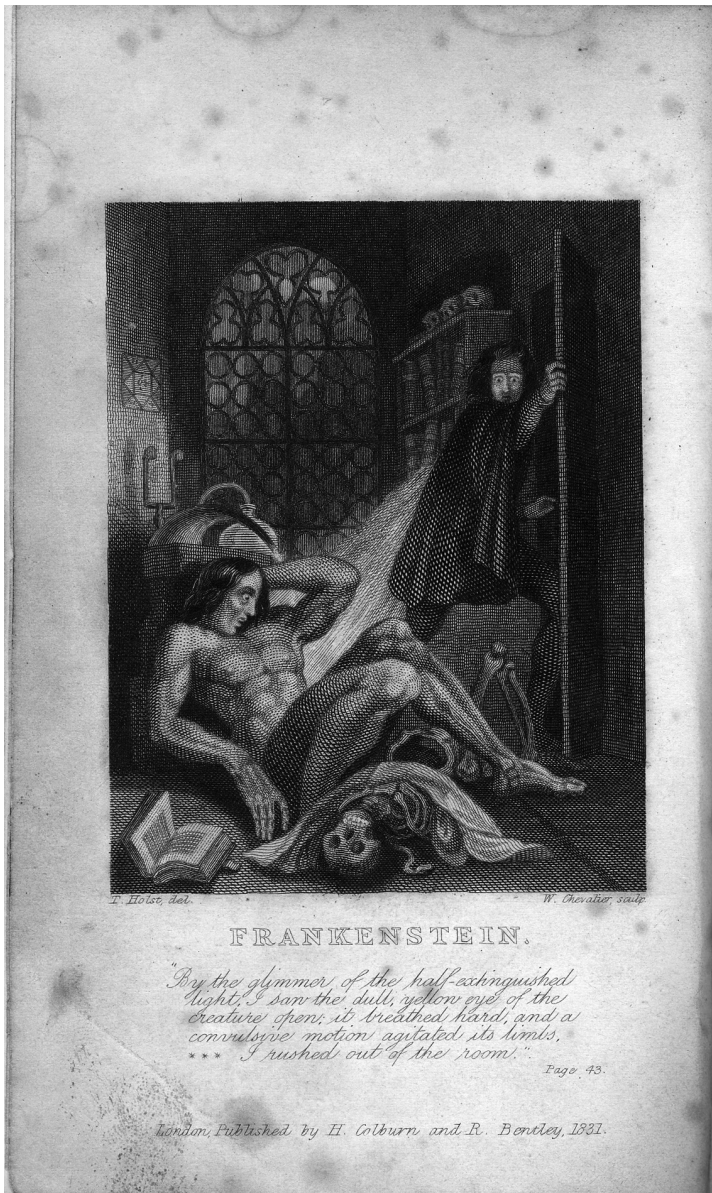


voice of the woman is lost in this debate between men. Others have seen Leila as a synecdoche for the contested Greek nation, both of which are imaged as beautiful corpses in the poem. While this does make schematic sense, the racial origins of Leila as European rather than Eastern, creates ambiguity. While Orientalist and post-colonial critics see the poem as involved in the stereotyping of Eastern cultures necessary to establish a Western sense of superiority and political dominance, others can point to the ambiguities, contradictions and paradoxes in this rather bleak fable where East and West collide and which provides no obviously normative standpoint from which to judge the actors in its tragedy.

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818; revised 1831)

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was first published anonymously in 1818 and revised for its third edition in 1831. Shelley added an important 'Introduction' which influenced the reader in how to read her story, as well as a number of significant textual changes. This reading uses the 1831 edition as text (Shelley, *Frankenstein* [A]). The novel clearly belongs to the Gothic genre of writing, although it has certain key features of its own. It eschews the medievalism of Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* and Lewis's *Monk* for a nearly contemporary setting in the 1790s, and is concerned with recent developments in scientific thought, as well as contemporary exploration and discovery. *Frankenstein* is not concerned with the supernatural but with the future possibilities of current ideas, so much so that many claim it as an early work of science fiction. It is also a novel which contains sensational events and excessive emotion; on its first publication it was assumed by many that the author must be male. *Frankenstein* avoids much of the cliché of Gothic writing, dealing with serious issues, such as education, environment, crime and responsibility. Contemporary reviewers identified the novel as belonging to the school of Godwin (to whom it was dedicated), and it shows many similarities with William Godwin's adaptation of Gothic as a novel of ideas. Godwin was Mary Shelley's father and Mary Wollstonecraft was her mother. She was the product of these two notable revolutionary thinkers. She had an unconventional education, brought up by her father on Wollstonecraft's programme of a rational female education. In 1814, She met the unconventional young poet Percy Shelley who was estranged from his wife, and by whom she then had two children (both of whom died soon after birth). Percy and Mary were married in 1816 following the suicide of Percy's first wife. It was during the couple's visit to Byron's rented Villa Diodati on the shores of Lake Geneva in 1816 that the ideas for the novel took shape after those present agreed to try their hand at each writing a tale of terror.

Frankenstein has an unusual narrative structure, in that the novel is composed of several embedded narratives (rather like concentric circles) and we



4.20 Frontispiece and title page to the English Standard Novels edition of *Frankenstein* (1831). The representation of the Creature on the left of the page is the only one authorised by Mary Shelley in her own lifetime.

have no omniscient narrator to provide an obvious scheme of moral values against which to judge the extraordinary events of the novel; hence the reader is left in a place of moral uncertainty, and has to exercise her or his own judgement. Most encounter the novel in modern texts based on the 1831 Standard Novels edition (though the 1818 text is increasingly popular) and

begin reading with the author's 'Introduction'. This was written some twelve years after the composition of the novel and eight years since Percy Shelley's tragic drowning. Shelley was earning a living from her writing as well as trying not to alienate her very conservative and hostile father-in-law, Sir Timothy Shelley. Her 'Introduction', as many have pointed out, contains several inaccuracies or misrememberings. She claims that her main intentions in writing the novel were to 'speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror', and to 'curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart' (pp. 7-8), deflecting the reader from some of the more serious questionings of the anonymously published 1818 text. She places the novel in a very clear moral framework, describing: 'the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together', mocking 'the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world' (p. 9). Readers, at the outset, should be wary of Shelley's attempt to provide a later and conventionally moral framework in which to read the novel as being about a man 'playing God', an interpretation far more suited to the various stage and cinematic adaptations than the original text.

The reader next encounters the reprint of the 1818 'Preface' written anonymously by Percy Shelley. He, conversely, places the novel in the context of contemporary natural philosophy. He claims that the novel is not 'merely weaving supernatural terrors' and is exempt from 'the disadvantages of a mere tale of spectres or enchantment' (pp. 11), identifying its chief purpose as not the condemnation of a man playing God, but 'the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affections, and the excellence of human virtue' (p. 12). This would seem to imply that Victor Frankenstein's crimes, if such they are, are committed against society and family, rather than God, and that human virtue, however twisted by social forms, is, as the Godwinian reformers would have it, 'universal'. The reader next encounters the outermost framing narrative of the story. Captain Robert Walton writes four letters to his sister, Margaret Walton Saville (who shares the same initials as Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley), concerning his departure from the family circle to undertake a voyage of exploration to the North Pole, in the double quest for the 'wondrous powers which attract the needle' (p. 15) and the passage across the top of the globe to the Pacific Ocean. Walton feels isolated and alienated, desiring the 'company of a man who would sympathise with me' (p. 19). In his fourth letter, Walton describes his imprisonment by the ice and the sighting of two figures, the second of which is the dying Victor Frankenstein engaged in a self-destructive pursuit of the being he has created and animated.

The first ten chapters of the novel proper are Victor's first-person account of his childhood, education and the creation of the monstrous being he now pursues. The next six chapters contain Victor's account of his Creature's narrative, which tells of its abandonment and the adventures it has experienced since its 'birth'. The Creature claims to have been born benevolent and sympathetic, but has become violent, criminal and aggressive as a result of his