

Summary notes for *Frankenstein* lectures, November 3 and 5, 2014

KEYWORDS: FILM, DOUBLING/ MIRRORING, HORROR, EDUCATION, ROMANTICISM, ALLUSION, EPIGRAPH, INTERTEXT/ INTERTEXTUALITY, AMBITION, EPISTOLARY FORM, FATE, SUBLIME

We explored how *Frankenstein*, a novel, has been particularly affected by the medium of film, looking at the many movies that have adapted the novel, starting with the 1910 silent version

The mirror scene at the end of that film, in which Frankenstein (at first) sees the creature when gazing into the mirror, points to a common interpretation of the story, in which the monster is an expression of some part of his creator; this kind of doubling is suggested in many adaptations of the novel, as well as in the novel itself

But we also talked about how the modern films tilted towards horror and titillation, often removing the philosophical themes of the novel; the creature in the 1931 film, for example, is mute, and is evil because he has a damaged (criminal) brain, not because he has been abandoned by his creator

The creature in the novel turns to evil because of rejection, and a persistent concern with education – both Frankenstein's and the creature's – runs through the novel; we also talked about how Mary Shelley's background, as the daughter of two famous thinkers, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, might have contributed to that theme

Another important influence on the novel is the manner of its creation: we discussed how Mary Shelley and her husband, the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, were staying with yet another Romantic poet, George Gordon Lord Byron; the friends took part in a competition to write ghost stories, and *Frankenstein* is Mary's contribution

Percy Shelley obviously read and contributed to the manuscript – we looked at the original manuscript, with examples of suggestions in his handwriting – but the work is generally agreed to be Mary's own conception and work

The novel has a subtitle – “the modern Prometheus” – and an **epigraph**, a quotation from *Paradise Lost*: we discussed the significance of these features

“The modern Prometheus” is an **allusion** to a figure from Greek mythology, the Titan who (at the behest of Zeus) created man, and then stole fire from the gods in order to help his creation evolve: he was punished by being chained to a rock,

and every day Zeus's eagles would eat his liver (which would grow back every night)

To the Romantics, Prometheus was a hero, and a rebel against authority: Mary's husband Percy wrote a lyrical drama called *Prometheus Unbound*: these lines are from the Epilogue to the play:

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

These lines can also be connected to the Romantic fondness for Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and the epigraph of the novel is taken from that poem: *Paradise Lost* is, then, an **intertext** for *Frankenstein*

We talked about how the novel is in some ways stitched together from many other literary references (rather like the creature is made up of many parts); **intertextuality** becomes significant when texts are in conversation with each other in some way, when one text uses a reference to another to frame its own themes/ concerns

The novel's epigraph come from a part in Milton's poem when, after the Fall, Adam is lamenting his creation and demanding to know why he was made; in *Paradise Lost*, Adam moves on to acknowledge God's goodness and his own failings, but Mary Shelley's quotation does not include that moment

The Miltonic intertext obviously applies to the creature, who calls Frankenstein to account for creating him, and it also applies to Frankenstein, who explicitly compares himself to Satan, the fallen angel

Captain Walton repeatedly describes Frankenstein in terms that suggest a higher spirit, and a kind of ruined majesty, again perhaps suggesting the Romantic view of Satan: while in the seventeenth century, Satan's ambition to exceed his natural position in heaven is damnable, to some Romantic readers his ambition, his unwillingness to bend, his refusal to be ruled, becomes attractive

On p. 214, where Frankenstein tries to convince Walton's crew to continue rather than to turn for home: he prioritizes glory, the crew emphasize their domestic concerns

Walton is presented as a figure who is poised between ambition and the more prudent, domestic course

The novel has an **epistolary** opening, framed by the letters and diary of Captain Walton: this structure affects the story being told

There are many layers in the novel:

Walton's letters, p. 51

Walton's diary, p. 61

Frankenstein's account, p. 64

The creature's account, p. 120

Frankenstein's account, p. 156

Walton's diary, p. 209

Walton's letters and diary, p. 212

The creature's speech is the most filtered by this structure; at the end, the time-streams move up to the present, and we are left largely ignorant of what happens to the characters: we see Frankenstein's death, but the fates of the creature and of Walton are not spelled out for us

Frankenstein can be connected to a figure like Marlowe's Doctor Faustus: like Faustus, he is brilliant and well-educated, and like Faustus, his ambitions lead him beyond the scope of the normal education

He often seems to feel – and this is another connection to Marlowe's play – that he was fated to take the path he has pursued, often referring to destiny (see the passages on pp. 63, 70, 77, 187-87, 204, 215)

The focus on education – which applies to characters other than Frankenstein and the creature – seems to suggest that we can take control of our lives and destinies: how does this theme fit with Frankenstein's frequent references to fate?

Bits and pieces of Romantic poetry appear in the novel (p. 85, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; p. 117, Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Mutability*; pp. 166-67, William Wordsworth's *Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey*)

Romantic poetry can be characterized by an interest in strong feeling, often prompted by the contemplation of the natural world, and in particular of the "**sublime**"; the descriptions of scenery on pp. 99, 114-15, and 165 are examples

The creature instinctively loves the natural world: how does this fact affect how we respond to him?

The creature, like Grendel in *Beowulf*, is a vengeful outsider, but unlike Grendel, he does not begin as evil

At the end of the novel, the monster refers to himself, p. 219, as a fallen angel; he becomes like Adam in the lines that are the epigraph of the novel, in that he moves past the injustice of what was done to him, to recognize his crimes (p. 220); by contrast, Frankenstein says, "I have been occupied in examining my past conduct; nor do I find it blameable" (p. 216)