

## LITERATURE ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK SHEET

Student Number	<b>09014414</b>
Module Title and Code	<b>UQ209632: Romantic Genius: Scottish and European Literature, 1750-1830-2019/20</b>
Assessment No. and Description	<b>Assessment 3 - Essay 2</b>
Essay Question/Title/No.	<b>'Explore the themes, ideas and elements of style that make Mary Shelley's <i>Frankenstein</i> a Romantic text'</b>
Date submitted	<b>10/12/2019</b>
Days late	<b>0</b>

Every genre of fiction has its representative figure – romance has **of** Romeo and Juliet, horror has Count Dracula and science fiction has Doctor Frankenstein and his monster. Mary Shelley’s quintessential novel not only added an integral text to the collective Romantic canon but incorporated existing Romantic standards and invented new ones in its creation. Shelley integrated staple Romantic themes such as the sublime natural world and presented the Romantic culture attempting to shirk the perceived academic narrow-mindedness of the Enlightenment. She also innovated greatly, and spearheaded discussion on themes such as monstrosity and ideas of human nature being shaped by society at large. These Romantic themes and ideas were also stylised in an innovative form – a framed narrative which is, in of itself, Romantic. It is no wonder then, with all this innovation, that Shelley was able to capture the Romantic Zeitgeist ‘in the form of a creature who has become the paramount monster, not only of the period in which she lived but that of the modern **age**’<sup>1</sup>

The Romantic idea of the ‘sublime’ is a core facet of the movement, and integral to the culture’s philosophy. Catherine Peck states in ‘Nature and the Romantic Poet’; ‘natural forces and iconic landscapes were [...] associated with the ‘sublime’ [...] fear and awe, which inspire imagination to the greatest degree’.<sup>2</sup> The Romantic theme of the natural world as sublime is incorporated throughout Shelley’s work; Doctor Frankenstein is often seen having an overwhelming response to his natural surroundings – especially on his return to his childhood home in Geneva, where he details where ‘I discovered more distinctively the black sides of Jura, and the bright summit of Mont Blanc. I wept like a child.’<sup>3</sup> He later exclaims his sorrows to the sublime natural world; ‘dear mountains! my own beautiful lake! [...] your summits are clear; the sky and lake are blue and placid. Is this to prognosticate peace, or to mock at my unhappiness?’<sup>4</sup>

Shelley uses the theme of sublime nature to not only comment on the Romantic perception of its power over the self, but to progress another theme simultaneously – that of the monster’s unwillingness to remain subservient to his monstrous body. These two Romantic threads are linked, as Jean-Louis Schefer states; ‘Frankenstein’s monster, to begin with, has a soul that will not rest within the frame established for it [...] this theme is foreshadowed by the extraordinary state of ‘ecstasy’ that Dr.

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<sup>1</sup> Gigante, Denise, ‘Too Much Life: Romantic Monstrosity in Frankenstein’, *The Common Reader* 26/10/2018 (Washington, Washington University Press, 2018)

<sup>2</sup> Peck, Catherine, ‘Nature and the Romantic Poet’, *brightONLINE* 18/11/2014 <http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/projects/brightonline/issue-number-five/nature-and-the-romantic-poet> (accessed: 08/12/2019)

<sup>3</sup> Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein* (Hertfordshire, Wordsworth, 1999) p. 58

<sup>4</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.59

Frankenstein experiences on the swiss glacier.<sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup> The experience of Frankenstein on the glacier referred to is that in which he looks upon the ice, spellbound; 'I remained in a recess of the rock, gazing on this wonderful and stupendous scene [...] their icy and glittering peaks shone in the sunlight over the clouds. My heart, which was before sorrowful, now swelled with something like joy'.<sup>7</sup>

As stated above, this reaction to the sublime majesty of nature links with another of Shelley's Romantic themes which she incorporated in her novel. As Schefer noted, the monster's 'soul' could not be subdued under the monstrous frame Frankenstein bestowed upon it, and whose first description was that; 'by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulse motion agitated its limbs'.<sup>8</sup> The Romantic expansion of the theme of monstrosity, in both man and 'monster', is detailed by Denise Gigante, who notes that; 'in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and in the Romantic age more generally, monstrosity came to be conceived as an excess of vitality.'<sup>9</sup> This can be applied to the monster through its exuberance of strength, muscle and nimbleness – as is described by the monster itself; 'remember, thou hast made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine; my joints more supple.'<sup>10</sup>

This Romantic idea of monstrosity can be further expanded to encompass the deterioration of Frankenstein himself. Sam Leith details this in the *Financial Times*; 'in the Romantic era, when atheist radicals such as Shelley were trying to get a new measure of the human self, no longer defined by a relationship with God, the pursuit of knowledge was a way to identify the limits of that self'<sup>11</sup> This monstrosity of man can be seen through the many stages of Frankenstein's relationship with his work and, ergo, the monster itself. His first reaction to his discovery of reanimation is purely positive – he states; 'the astonishment which I had at first experienced on this discovery soon gave place to delight and rapture.'<sup>12</sup> Throughout the stages leading to the creation of the monster, however, we can see his humanity attempting to pull him from the monstrosity in which he will surely submerge. He states himself that; 'often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation, whilst, still urged on my eagerness which perpetually increased, I brought my work near to a conclusion.'<sup>13</sup> It is with the creation of the monster, however, that Frankenstein is met with the reality of the culmination of his

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<sup>5</sup> Schefer, Frankenstein, *Creation and Monstrosity* p. 117

<sup>6</sup> Schefer, Jean-Louis, 'The Bread and the Blood', Frankenstein, *Creation and Monstrosity* (London, Reaktion Books, 1994) p. 117

<sup>7</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p. 76

<sup>8</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p. 45

<sup>9</sup> Gigante, *The Common Reader*

<sup>10</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p. 77

<sup>11</sup> Leith, Sam, 'Frankenstein: an all too human monster', *Financial Times* 9/03/2018  
<<https://www.ft.com/content/46233f88-1d4a-11e8-a748-5da7d696ccab>>

<sup>12</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.42

<sup>13</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.43

work – and where his descent into monstrosity begins; ‘his yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath [...] these luxuriations only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes.’<sup>14</sup> He details his fear and disappointment at the hulking figure in front of him when he states; ‘I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream had vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart’, his mind then seems to have begun to deteriorate as he is soon after seen with ‘wildness in [his] eyes for which he could not account; and [...] loud, unrestrained, heartless laughter’.<sup>15</sup> Jill Lepore explains Shelley’s attempt to show the deterioration of Frankenstein and the monster shown to be more ‘human’. He writes; ‘the art of the book lies in the way Shelley nudges readers’ sympathy, page by page, paragraph by paragraph, even line by line, from Frankenstein to the creature’.<sup>16</sup> This apparent transition of perceived monstrosity from creator to creation can be unequivocally seen in their exchange just before we are transported to the monster’s point of view. Leith continues his commentary; ‘where Frankenstein’s first instinct is for ‘mortal combat’, the creature prefers diplomacy. He appeals to natural justice.’<sup>17</sup> This can be seen when Frankenstein attacks the creature without listening to explanations, whereas the creature attempts to discuss the situation calmly – Frankenstein states that ‘my rage was without bounds, I sprang on him, impelled by all the feelings which can arm one being against the existence of another’, this is in comparison to the monster, who attempts conversation; ‘you are in the wrong,’ replied the fiend; ‘and, instead of threatening, I am content to reason with you.’<sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> Leith expounds this interaction by explaining the monster’s position of calm converse; ‘the creature makes human arguments from his human feelings with human words – and is rejected [...] his problem is not that he cannot speak: it is that he cannot be heard’<sup>20</sup>

The Romantic movement, despite its impact on the modern world, was not always so readily accepted – it had to compete with the change which had preceded it; the Enlightenment. As such, both cultures clashed and the Romantics perceived that they needed to shirk the academic narrow-mindedness of the Enlightenment to incorporate change - and this is reflected in Romantic literature, including ‘Frankenstein’. Crosbie Smith explains this ideological friction further; ‘Mary Shelley’s celebrated text was largely structured by powerful tensions between the surface ‘rationality’, associated with Enlightenment ideology, and the deeper and darker side of nature and human beings beloved by

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<sup>14</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.45

<sup>15</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.45

<sup>16</sup> Lepore, Jill, ‘The Strange and Twisted Life of ‘Frankenstein’’, *The New Yorker* 05/02/2018  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/02/12/the-strange-and-twisted-life-of-frankenstein> (accessed: 07/12/2019)

<sup>17</sup> Leith, *Financial Times*

<sup>18</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.77

<sup>19</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.111

<sup>20</sup> Leith, *Financial Times*

Romantic poets'.<sup>21</sup> This friction can be seen through the friction between characters such as Frankenstein and his monster. Victor Frankenstein is seen as an Enlightenment educated figure, as he details his academic mindset; 'in my education my father had taken the greatest precautions that my mind should be impressed with no supernatural terrors. I do not ever remember to have trembled at a tale of superstition, or to have feared the apparition of a spirit.'<sup>22</sup> This Enlightenment mindset is then thrown into disarray as it is met with the reality of the situation – of Frankenstein's creation of his monster, when he is beset by superstitious hauntings in his dreams; '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'.<sup>23</sup> The shift to a Romantic viewpoint is detailed further by the City University of New York which details, in its handbook on literary matters of this degree, that there are; 'two major differences: the replacement of reason by the imagination for primary place among the human faculties and the shift from a mimetic to an expressive orientation for poetry, and indeed all literature'.<sup>24</sup> This 'replacement of reason by the imagination' can be – again – seen by comparing the characters of Frankenstein and his monster. While Frankenstein boasts of the accomplishments made by the Enlightenment, and how it lets man play with the power of God; 'they have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake', the monster is enamoured by the literary accomplishments of the Romantic period - of their protagonists' mindfulness and philosophical musings; 'I thought Werther himself a more divine being than I had beheld or imagined [...] the disquisitions upon death and suicide were calculated to fill me with wonder.'<sup>25 26</sup>

Another Romantic idea which Mary Shelley develops in her novel is that of the role of society in shaping human nature. She argues that society moulds the person into that which it will be for the rest of its life – she shows this through the monster who, as Anne McWhir explains; 'suffer[s] because, unlike Samuel Stanhope Smith's native student, he cannot pass for white. He is trapped in the abyss between the ideology his education teaches and his own experience of a rejecting world.'<sup>27</sup> This can be seen as the monster at first cannot communicate with Frankenstein yet then proceeds to educate himself through his hidden experience with the family; 'His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds,

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, Crosbie, 'Frankenstein and Natural Magic', *Frankenstein, Creation and Monstrosity* (London, Reaction Books, 1994) p. 39

<sup>22</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.41

<sup>23</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.46

<sup>24</sup> 'Contrasts with Neoclassicism', *A Guide to the study of Literature: A Companion Text for Core Studies 6, Landmarks of Literature* < <https://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/rom.html> > (accessed: 07/12/2019)

<sup>25</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.38

<sup>26</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.99

<sup>27</sup> McWhir, Anne, 'Teaching the monster to read: Mary Shelley, Education and Frankenstein, *The Educational Legacy of Romanticism* (Ontario, Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1990) p. 73

while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear’ then transitions, through his diligence, into; ‘my days were spent in close attention, that I might more speedily master the language; and I may boast that I improved more rapidly than the Arabian [...] I comprehended and could imitate almost every word that was spoken.’<sup>28 29</sup>

Romantic figurehead William Wordsworth himself even wrote of the duty society – through literary means – plays in shaping a newly formed being. He wrote in the preface of his ‘Lyrical Ballads’; ‘If the time should ever come when what is now called science [...] familiarised to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.’<sup>30</sup> It is unfortunate then, that society is not kind to the monster, and as such he is formed into a figure of loathing and of distrust of man – he is taught, early on in his life, to fear man; ‘I longed to join them but dared not. I remembered too well the treatment I had suffered the night before from the barbarous villagers, and resolved, whatever course of conduct I might hereafter think it right to pursue, that for the present I would remain quietly in my hovel’.<sup>31</sup> As Jill Lapore notes, the monster’s point of view is ‘the autobiography of an infant’, and as such it is like a sponge and soaks up any and all interactions it has with all beings.<sup>32</sup> It is fortunate, to an extent, that Shelley writes the monster to receive guidance in the good of mankind through core Romantic texts – a literary incorporation of the lending of divine spirit in reference to Wordsworth; ‘[the monster’s possessions] consisted of *Paradise Lost*, a volume of *Plutarch’s Lives*, and the *Sorrows of Young Werther*. The possession of these treasures gave me extreme delight.’<sup>33</sup> It is unfortunate then, that the monster is – despite the attempted reconciliation by Romantic texts – still shaped beyond grasp by the cruelty of man. The monster then goes on to commit murderous acts – acts it explains are the result of its moulding by its treatment by human society; ‘not I, but she shall suffer: the murder I have committed because I am for ever robbed of all that she could give me, she shall atone. The crime had its source in hers: be hers the punishment!’<sup>34</sup>

While Mary Shelley injected many different aspects of Romantic cultural and literary theming and ideas into her novel, she incorporated them all neatly under Romantic stylings as well. She introduces a framed narrative, a literary style which Werner Wolf describes as; ‘distinct parts of fictitious verbal stories, namely intradiegetic (fragments of) narratives that embed, by means of one or several secondary

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<sup>28</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.46

<sup>29</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.92

<sup>30</sup> Wordsworth, William, ‘Lyrical Ballads’, *Poetry and Cultural Studies: A Reader* p. 24 (Illinois, The University of Illinois Press, 2009) p. 24

<sup>31</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.85

<sup>32</sup> Lepore, *The New Yorker*

<sup>33</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.98

<sup>34</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.110

narrator(s) or narrator character(s)'.<sup>35</sup> This framed narrative structure is used by Shelley to place the reader in the perspective of Robert Walton, Doctor Frankenstein himself, and – of course – the monster.<sup>36 37 38</sup> This Romantic styling is compounded by Shelley's incorporation of Romantic works in her own novel – she includes excerpts of 'Paradise Lost', 'Mutability' and 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' throughout her piece. This acts to bolster existing scenes such as the tension of Victor Frankenstein's realisation of the horror of his creation being supported by Coleridge's poetic musings. As Charles Schung writes; 'Romantic literature necessitates the active participation of the reader, who must attend closely to the workings of the artist's (actually the persona's) mind as it shapes and controls the work of art.'<sup>39</sup>

Overall, it should come as to no surprise to hear that 'Frankenstein' not only exists as a cultural cornerstone for the science fiction genre, as stated in the opening of this essay, but is also an insightful and innovative addition to the Romantic canon of work. It achieves Romantic standing through its incorporation of Romantic themes such as the sublime aspect of the natural world and the monstrosity of man but also of creation. It also develops ideas pervading through the Romantic movement, as it touches on the attempts of the Romantics to shirk the narrow-minded academia of the Enlightenment and of the overwhelming power of society to mould the individual in a way not before comprehended. These Romantic aspects are then formed into an individual piece of literature which uses Romantic form itself to portray the tale of Frankenstein from multiple angles. While the monster – and indeed, the novel – may be concocted from multiple, individual sources, both find a soul through Romanticism.

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<sup>35</sup> Wolf, Werner, 'Framing Borders in Frame Stories', *Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media* (New York, Rodopi, 2006) p. 179

<sup>36</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.13

<sup>37</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.26

<sup>38</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein* p.79

<sup>39</sup> Schug, Charles, 'The Romantic Form of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 17:4 (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1977) p.607

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