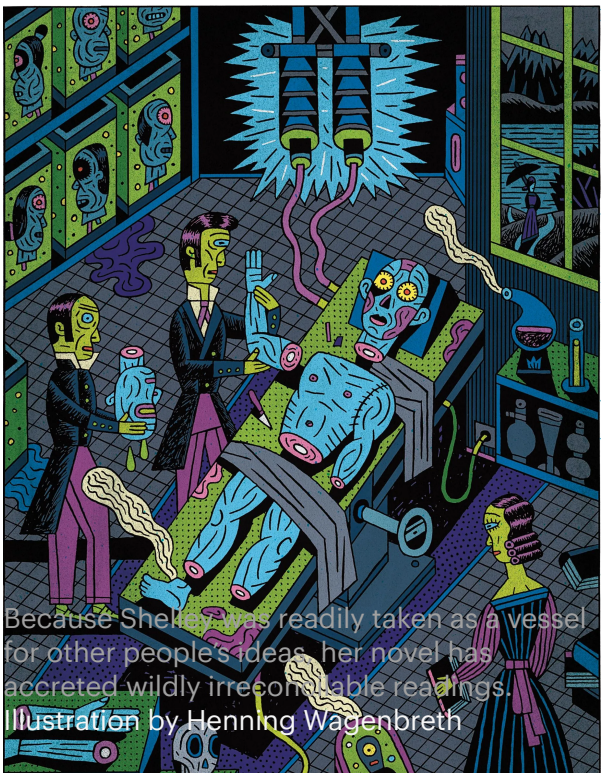
LIFE AND LETTERS

THE STRANGE AND TWISTED LIFE OF “FRANKENSTEIN”

After two hundred years, are we ready for the truth about Mary Shelley’s novel?

By Jill Lepore

February 5, 2018



Because Shelley was readily taken as a vessel for other people's ideas, her novel has accreted wildly irreconcilable readings.
Illustration by Henning Wagenbreth

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Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley began writing “Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus” when she was eighteen years old, two years after she’d become pregnant with her first child, a baby she did not name. “Nurse the baby, read,” she had written in her diary, day after day, until the eleventh day: “I awoke in the night to give it suck it appeared to be sleeping so quietly that I would not awake it,” and then, in the morning, “Find my baby dead.” With grief at that loss came a fear of “a fever from the milk.” Her breasts were swollen, inflamed, unsucked; her sleep, too, grew fevered. “Dream that my little baby came to life again; that it had only been

cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived," she wrote in her diary. "Awake and find no baby."

Pregnant again only weeks later, she was likely still nursing her second baby when she started writing "Frankenstein," and pregnant with her third by the time she finished. She didn't put her name on her book—she published "Frankenstein" anonymously, in 1818, not least out of a concern that she might lose custody of her children—and she didn't give her monster a name, either. "This anonymous androdaemon," one reviewer called it. For the first theatrical production of "Frankenstein," staged in London in 1823 (by which time the author had given birth to four children, buried three, and lost another unnamed baby to a miscarriage so severe that she nearly died of bleeding that stopped only when her husband had her sit on ice), the monster was listed on the playbill as "———."

"This nameless mode of naming the unnameable is rather good," Shelley remarked about the creature's theatrical billing. She herself had no name of her own. Like the creature pieced together from cadavers collected by Victor Frankenstein, her name was an assemblage of parts: the name of her mother, the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, stitched to that of her father, the philosopher William Godwin, grafted onto that of her husband, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, as if Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley were the sum of her relations, bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh, if not the milk of her mother's milk, since her mother had died eleven days after giving birth to her, mainly too sick to give suck—*Awoke and found no mother*.

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“It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils,” Victor Frankenstein, a university student, says, pouring out his tale. The rain patters on the windowpane; a bleak light flickers from a dying candle. He looks at the “lifeless thing” at his feet, come to life: “I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.” Having labored so long to bring the creature to life, he finds himself disgusted and horrified—“unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created”—and flees, abandoning his creation, unnamed. “I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion,” the creature says, before, in the book’s final scene, he disappears on a raft of ice.

“Frankenstein” is four stories in one: an allegory, a fable, an epistolary novel, and an autobiography, a chaos of literary fertility that left its very young author at pains to explain her “hideous progeny.” In the introduction she wrote for a revised edition in 1831, she took up the humiliating question “How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea” and made up a story in which

she virtually erased herself as an author, insisting that the story had come to her in a dream (“I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision,—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together”) and that writing it consisted of “making only a transcript” of that dream. A century later, when a lurching, grunting Boris Karloff played the creature in Universal Pictures’s brilliant 1931 production of “Frankenstein,” directed by James Whale, the monster—prodigiously eloquent, learned, and persuasive in the novel—was no longer merely nameless but all but speechless, too, as if what Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley had to say was too radical to be heard, an agony unutterable.

Cartoon by Liana Finck

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Every book is a baby, born, but “Frankenstein” is often supposed to have been more assembled than written, an unnatural birth, as though all that the author had done were to piece together the writings of others, especially those of her father and her husband. “If Godwin’s daughter could not help philosophising,” one mid-twentieth-century critic wrote, “Shelley’s wife knew also the eerie charms of the morbid, the occult, the scientifically bizarre.” This enduring condescension, the idea of the author as a vessel for the ideas of other people—a fiction in which the author participated, so as to avoid the scandal of her own

brain—goes some way to explaining why “Frankenstein” has accreted so many wildly different and irreconcilable readings and restagings in the two centuries since its publication. For its bicentennial, the original, 1818 edition has been reissued, as a trim little paperback (Penguin Classics), with an introduction by the distinguished biographer Charlotte Gordon, and as a beautifully illustrated hardcover keepsake, “The New Annotated Frankenstein” (Liveright), edited and annotated by Leslie S. Klinger. Universal is developing a new “Bride of Frankenstein” as part of a series of remakes from its backlist of horror movies. Filmography recapitulating politico-chicanery, the age of the superhero is about to yield to the age of the monster. But what about the baby?

“Frankenstein,” the story of a creature who has no name, has for two hundred years been made to mean just about anything. Most lately, it has been taken as a cautionary tale for Silicon Valley technologists, an interpretation that derives less from the 1818 novel than from later stage and film versions, especially the 1931 film, and that took its modern form in the aftermath of Hiroshima. In that spirit, M.I.T. Press has just published an edition of the original text “annotated for scientists, engineers, and creators of all kinds,” and prepared by the leaders of the Frankenstein Bicentennial Project, at Arizona State University, with funding from the National Science Foundation; they offer the book as a catechism for designers of robots

and inventors of artificial intelligences. “Remorse extinguished every hope,” Victor says, in Volume II, Chapter 1, by which time the creature has begun murdering everyone Victor loves. “I had been the author of unalterable evils; and I lived in daily fear, lest the monster whom I had created should perpetrate some new wickedness.” The M.I.T. edition appends, here, a footnote: “The remorse Victor expresses is reminiscent of J. Robert Oppenheimer’s sentiments when he witnessed the unspeakable power of the atomic bomb. . . . Scientists’ responsibility must be engaged before their creations are unleashed.”

This is a way to make use of the novel, but it involves stripping out nearly all the sex and birth, everything female—material first mined by Muriel Spark, in a biography of Shelley published in 1951, on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of her death. Spark, working closely with Shelley’s diaries and paying careful attention to the author’s eight years of near-constant pregnancy and loss, argued that “Frankenstein” was no minor piece of genre fiction but a literary work of striking originality. In the nineteen-seventies, that interpretation was taken up by feminist literary critics who wrote about “Frankenstein” as establishing the origins of science fiction by way of the “female gothic.” What made Mary Shelley’s work so original, Ellen Moers argued at the time, was that she was a writer who was a mother. Tolstoy had thirteen children, born at home, Moers pointed out, but the major female eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers, the Austens and Dickinsons, tended to be “spinsters and virgins.” Shelley was an exception.

So was Mary Wollstonecraft, a woman Shelley knew not as a mother but as a writer who wrote about, among other things, how to raise a baby. “I conceive it to be the duty of every rational creature to attend to its offspring,” Wollstonecraft wrote in “Thoughts on the Education of Daughters,” in 1787, ten years before giving birth to the author of “Frankenstein.” As Charlotte Gordon notes in her dual biography “Romantic Outlaws,” Wollstonecraft first met her fellow political radical William Godwin in 1791, at a London dinner party hosted by the publisher of Thomas Paine’s “Rights of Man.” Wollstonecraft and Godwin were “mutually displeased with each other,” Godwin later wrote; they were the smartest people in the room, and they couldn’t help arguing all evening. Wollstonecraft’s “Vindication of the Rights of Woman” appeared in 1792, and, the next year, Godwin published “Political Justice.” In 1793, during an affair with the American speculator and diplomat Gilbert Imlay, Wollstonecraft became pregnant. (“I am nourishing a creature,” she wrote Imlay.) Not long after Wollstonecraft gave birth to a daughter, whom she named Fanny, Imlay abandoned her. She and Godwin became lovers in 1796, and when she became pregnant they married, for the sake of the baby, even though neither of them believed in marriage. In 1797, Wollstonecraft died of an infection contracted from the fingers of a physician who reached into her uterus to remove the afterbirth. Godwin’s daughter bore the name of his dead wife, as if she could be brought back to life, another afterbirth.

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was fifteen years old when she met Percy Bysshe Shelley, in 1812. He was twenty, and married, with a pregnant wife. Having been thrown out of Oxford for his atheism and disowned by his father, Shelley had sought out William Godwin, his intellectual hero, as a surrogate father. Shelley and Godwin *fille* spent their illicit courtship, as much Romanticism as romance, passionately reading the works of her parents while reclining on Wollstonecraft’s grave, in the St. Pancras churchyard. “Go to the tomb and read,” she wrote in her diary. “Go with Shelley to the churchyard.” Plainly, they were doing more than reading, because she was pregnant when she ran away with him, fleeing her father’s house in the half-light of night, along with her stepsister, Claire Clairmont, who wanted to be ruined, too.

If any man served as an inspiration for Victor Frankenstein, it was Lord Byron, who followed his imagination, indulged his passions, and abandoned his children. He was “mad, bad, and dangerous to know,” as one of his lovers pronounced, mainly because of his many affairs, which likely included sleeping with his half sister, Augusta Leigh. Byron married in January, 1815, and a daughter, Ada, was born in December. But, when his wife left him, a year into their marriage, Byron was forced never to see his wife or daughter again, lest his wife reveal the scandal of his affair with Leigh. (Ada was about the age Mary Godwin’s first baby would have been, had she lived. Ada’s mother, fearing that the girl might grow up to become a poet, as mad and bad as her father, raised her, instead, to be a mathematician. Ada Lovelace, a scientist as imaginative as Victor Frankenstein, would in

1843 provide an influential theoretical description of a general-purpose computer, a century before one was built.)

In the spring of 1816, Byron, fleeing scandal, left England for Geneva, and it was there that he met up with Percy Shelley, Mary Godwin, and Claire Clairmont. Moralizers called them the League of Incest. By summer, Clairmont was pregnant by Byron. Byron was bored. One evening, he announced, “We will each write a ghost story.” Godwin began the story that would become “Frankenstein.” Byron later wrote, “Methinks it is a wonderful book for a girl of nineteen—*not* nineteen, indeed, at that time.”

During the months when Godwin was turning her ghost story into a novel, and nourishing yet another creature in her belly, Shelley’s wife, pregnant now with what would have been their third child, killed herself; Clairmont gave birth to a girl—Byron’s, though most people assumed it was Shelley’s—and Shelley and Godwin got married. For a time, they attempted to adopt the girl, though Byron later took her, having noticed that nearly all of Godwin and Shelley’s children had died. “I so totally disapprove of the mode of Children’s treatment in their family—that I should look upon the Child as going into a hospital,” he wrote, cruelly, about the Shelleys. “Have they *reared* one?” (Byron, by no means interested in rearing a child himself, placed the girl in a convent, where she died at the age of five.)

When “Frankenstein,” begun in the summer of 1816, was published eighteen months later, it bore an unsigned preface by Percy Shelley and a dedication to William Godwin. The book became an

immediate sensation. “It seems to be universally known and read,” a friend wrote to Percy Shelley. Sir Walter Scott wrote, in an early review, “The author seems to us to disclose uncommon powers of poetic imagination.” Scott, like many readers, assumed that the author was Percy Shelley. Reviewers less enamored of the Romantic poet damned the book’s Godwinian radicalism and its Byronic impieties. John Croker, a conservative member of Parliament, called “Frankenstein” a “tissue of horrible and disgusting absurdity”—radical, unhinged, and immoral.

But the politics of “Frankenstein” are as intricate as its structure of stories nested like Russian dolls. The outermost doll is a set of letters from an English adventurer to his sister, recounting his Arctic expedition and his meeting with the strange, emaciated, haunted Victor Frankenstein. Within the adventurer’s account, Frankenstein tells the story of his fateful experiment, which has led him to pursue his creature to the ends of the earth. And within Frankenstein’s story lies the tale told by the creature himself, the littlest, innermost Russian doll: the baby.

The novel’s structure meant that those opposed to political radicalism often found themselves baffled and bewildered by “Frankenstein,” as literary critics such as Chris Baldick and Adriana Craciun have pointed out. The novel appears to be heretical and revolutionary; it

also appears to be counter-revolutionary. It depends on which doll is doing the talking.

If “Frankenstein” is a referendum on the French Revolution, as some critics have read it, Victor Frankenstein’s politics align nicely with those of Edmund Burke, who described violent revolution as “a species of political monster, which has always ended by devouring those who have produced it.” The creature’s own politics, though, align not with Burke’s but with those of two of Burke’s keenest adversaries, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. Victor Frankenstein has made use of other men’s bodies, like a lord over the peasantry or a king over his subjects, in just the way that Godwin denounced when he described feudalism as a “ferocious monster.” (“How dare you sport thus with life?” the creature asks his maker.) The creature, born innocent, has been treated so terribly that he has become a villain, in just the way that Wollstonecraft predicted. “People are rendered ferocious by misery,” she wrote, “and misanthropy is ever the offspring of discontent.” (“Make me happy,” the creature begs Frankenstein, to no avail.)

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley took pains that readers’ sympathies would lie not only with Frankenstein, whose suffering is dreadful, but also with the creature, whose suffering is worse. 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, even when it comes to the creature’s vicious murders, first of Frankenstein’s little brother, then of his best friend, and, finally, of his bride. Much evidence suggests that she succeeded. “The justice is

indisputably on his side,” one critic wrote in 1824, “and his sufferings are, to me, touching to the last degree.”

“Hear my tale,” the creature insists, when he at last confronts his creator. What follows is the autobiography of an infant. He awoke, and all was confusion. “I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing.” He was cold and naked and hungry and bereft of company, and yet, having no language, was unable even to name these sensations. “But, feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept.” He learned to walk, and began to wander, still unable to speak—“the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again.” Eventually, he found shelter in a lean-to adjacent to a cottage alongside a wood, where, observing the cottagers talk, he learned of the existence of language: “I discovered the names that were given to some of the most familiar objects of discourse: I learned and applied the words *fire*, *milk*, *bread*, and *wood*.” Watching the cottagers read a book, “Ruins of Empires,” by the eighteenth-century French revolutionary the Comte de Volney, he both learned how to read and acquired “a cursory knowledge of history”—a litany of injustice. “I heard of the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty; of rank, descent, and noble blood.” He learned that the weak are everywhere abused by the powerful, and the poor despised.

“I was about your age when I, too, started having security concerns.”

Cartoon by Frank Cotham

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Shelley kept careful records of the books she read and translated, naming title after title and compiling a list each year—Milton, Goethe, Rousseau, Ovid, Spenser, Coleridge, Gibbon, and hundreds more, from history to chemistry. “Babe is not well,” she noted in her diary while writing “Frankenstein.” “Write, draw and walk; read Locke.” Or, “Walk; write; read the ‘Rights of Women.’ ” The creature keeps track of his reading, too, and, unsurprisingly, he reads the books that Shelley read and reread most often. One day, wandering in the woods, he stumbles upon a leather trunk, lying on the ground, that contains three books: Milton’s “Paradise Lost,” Plutarch’s “Lives,” and Goethe’s “The Sorrows of Young Werther”—the library that, along with Volney’s “Ruins,” determines his political philosophy, as reviewers readily understood. “His code of ethics is formed on this extraordinary stock of poetical theology, pagan biography, adulterous sentimentality, and atheistical jacobinism,” according to the review of “Frankenstein” most widely read in the United States, “yet, in spite of all his enormities, we think the monster, a very pitiable and ill-used monster.”

Sir Walter Scott found this the most preposterous part of

“Frankenstein”: “That he should have not only learned to speak, but to read, and, for aught we know, to write—that he should have become acquainted with Werter, with Plutarch’s Lives, and with Paradise Lost, by listening through a hole in a wall, seems as unlikely as that he should have acquired, in the same way, the problems of Euclid, or the art of book-keeping by single and double entry.” But the creature’s account of his education very closely follows the conventions of a genre of writing far distant from Scott’s own: the slave narrative.

Frederick Douglass, born into slavery the year “Frankenstein” was published, was following those same conventions when, in his autobiography, he described learning to read by trading with white boys for lessons. Douglass realized his political condition at the age of twelve, while reading the “Dialogue Between a Master and Slave,” reprinted in “The Columbian Orator” (a book for which he paid fifty cents, and which was one of the only things he brought with him when he escaped from slavery). It was his coming of age. “The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers,” Douglass wrote, in a line that the creature himself might have written.

Likewise, the creature comes of age when he finds Frankenstein’s notebook, recounting his experiment, and learns how he was created, and with what injustice he has been treated. It’s at this moment that the creature’s tale is transformed from the autobiography of an infant

to the autobiography of a slave. “I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing,” Douglass wrote. “It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy.” So, too, the creature: “Increase of knowledge only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast I was.” Douglass: “I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead.” The creature: “Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live?” Douglass seeks his escape; the creature seeks his revenge.

Among the many moral and political ambiguities of Shelley’s novel is the question of whether Victor Frankenstein is to be blamed for creating the monster—usurping the power of God, and of women—or for failing to love, care for, and educate him. The Frankenstein-is-Oppenheimer model considers only the former, which makes for a weak reading of the novel. Much of “Frankenstein” participates in the debate over abolition, as several critics have astutely observed, and the revolution on which the novel most plainly turns is not the one in France but the one in Haiti. For abolitionists in England, the Haitian revolution, along with continued slave rebellions in Jamaica and other West Indian sugar islands, raised deeper and harder questions about liberty and equality than the revolution in France had, since they involved an inquiry into the idea of racial difference. Godwin and Wollstonecraft had been abolitionists, as were both Percy and Mary Shelley, who, for instance, refused to eat sugar because of how it was produced. Although Britain and the United States enacted laws abolishing the importation of slaves in 1807, the debate over slavery in Britain’s territories continued through the decision in favor of

emancipation, in 1833. Both Shelleys closely followed this debate, and in the years before and during the composition of “Frankenstein” they together read several books about Africa and the West Indies. Percy Shelley was among those abolitionists who urged not immediate but gradual emancipation, fearing that the enslaved, so long and so violently oppressed, and denied education, would, if unconditionally freed, seek a vengeance of blood. He asked, “Can he who the day before was a trampled slave suddenly become liberal-minded, forbearing, and independent?”

Given Mary Shelley’s reading of books that stressed the physical distinctiveness of Africans, her depiction of the creature is explicitly racial, figuring him as African, as opposed to European. “I was more agile than they, and could subsist upon coarser diet,” the creature says. “I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded theirs.” This characterization became, onstage, a caricature. Beginning with the 1823 stage production of “Frankenstein,” the actor playing “———” wore blue face paint, a color that identified him less as dead than as colored. It was this production that George Canning, abolitionist, Foreign Secretary, and leader of the House of Commons, invoked in 1824, during a parliamentary debate about emancipation. Tellingly, Canning’s remarks brought together the novel’s depiction of the creature as a baby and the culture’s figuring of Africans as children. “In dealing

with the negro, Sir, we must remember that we are dealing with a being possessing the form and strength of a man, but the intellect only of a child,” Canning told Parliament. “To turn him loose in the manhood of his physical strength, in the maturity of his physical passions, but in the infancy of his uninstructed reason, would be to raise up a creature resembling the splendid fiction of a recent romance.” In later nineteenth-century stage productions, the creature was explicitly dressed as an African. Even the 1931 James Whale film, in which Karloff wore green face paint, furthers this figuring of the creature as black: he is, in the film’s climactic scene, lynched.

Because the creature reads as a slave, “Frankenstein” holds a unique place in American culture, as the literary scholar Elizabeth Young argued, a few years ago, in “Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor.” “What is the use of living, when in fact I am dead,” the black abolitionist David Walker asked from Boston in 1829, in his “Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World,” anticipating Eldridge Cleaver’s “Soul on Ice” by a century and a half. “Slavery is everywhere the pet monster of the American people,” Frederick Douglass declared in New York, on the eve of the American Civil War. Nat Turner was called a monster; so was John Brown. By the eighteen-fifties, Frankenstein’s monster regularly appeared in American political cartoons as a nearly naked black man, signifying slavery itself, seeking his vengeance upon the nation that created him.

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley was dead by then, her own chaotic origins already forgotten. Nearly everyone she loved died before she did, most of them when she was still very young. Her

half sister, Fanny Imlay, took her own life in 1816. Percy Shelley drowned in 1822. Lord Byron fell ill and died in Greece in 1824, leaving Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley, as she put it, “the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me.”

She chose that as the theme behind the novel she wrote eight years after “Frankenstein.” Published in 1826, when the author was twenty-eight, “The Last Man” is set in the twenty-first century, when only one man endures, the lone survivor of a terrible plague, having failed —for all his imagination, for all his knowledge—to save the life of a single person. *Nurse the baby, read. Find my baby dead.* ♦

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