



Form, structure and language

Form

Other information relating to form, structure and language can be found throughout this book. Detailed information about the Gothic form within which the novel operates can be found on pp. 59–61 of this guide. The *Themes* section also looks closely at issues of form, structure and language relating to Shelley's use of the elements, nature, dreams and the supernatural.

About the novel

The idea for Shelley's most celebrated novel came during a summer stay with her husband, Byron and Polidori at the Villa Diodati by Lake Geneva in Switzerland, very near to Victor Frankenstein's home town. At Byron's suggestion they each told a ghost story. Shelley told the first version of what was to become *Frankenstein*. It was first published anonymously in 1818 in three-volume form, when Shelley was only 20, followed by a two-volume edition, bearing the author's name (1823), and a revised single-volume version (1831). Deeply concerned with social issues, the novel carries the unmistakable imprint of Shelley's parents, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. Wollstonecraft is recognised as one of the great early champions of female rights, expounded in works such as *Maria* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, while Godwin was both novelist (*The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, *Mandeville* and *Fleetwood*) and political thinker (*Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Political Justice*). The novel is also heavily influenced by the Romantics (especially Wordsworth, Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley), and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Another major formal influence is the canon of Gothic fiction; we know from Shelley's journal that she had read Radcliffe, Lewis (who visited the party at the Villa Diodati), Charles Robert Maturin and William Beckford, all central figures in the Gothic movement.

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The three-volume novel

The three-volume novel was a major stage in the development of the modern novel and became a standard publishing format in nineteenth-century England. It does not correspond to current ideas of a trilogy of novels, which are three related yet distinct works of fiction. Instead it was the publication of a single work in three sections or instalments. This was economically driven. Books were relatively expensive to print and purchase, so a system had to be devised to maintain the developing publishing industry. A novel divided into three parts could create a demand (Part I whetting an appetite for Parts II and III); in addition, the income from Part I could pay for the printing costs of the later parts. The form became particularly successful in mid-Victorian times when it became closely related to the work of the circulating libraries.

The price of each volume remained stable at half a guinea for most of the nineteenth century — roughly equivalent to the cost of a high-quality hardback book today (around £20). The cost of a single novel, in other words, was one and a half guineas (approximately £60). Around two-thirds of novels first published in book form (not already serialised in magazines) were released as three-volume sets; reprints of successful three-volume novels were often done in cheap one-volume editions.

Task 10

The following typical elements of science fiction are present in *Frankenstein*. Explore the details of each:

- grotesque monsters and aliens
- fear of the outsider, the foreign and the alien
- flawed scientific experiment and its consequences
- threat to established society
- use of 'cutting edge' or invented technology
- the character of the 'mad scientist'

Multiple narratives

The use of multiple narrators is typical of Gothic fiction. Classic genre texts such as *The Monk* (Lewis), *Melmoth the Wanderer* (Maturin) and *Dracula* (Stoker) all employ the device. It is also used to considerable effect in *Frankenstein*. We need to consider why Shelley chose this method, and its impact. The testimony of various narrators could be a method to add plausibility to a tale which otherwise lacks verisimilitude (truth to life). It also provides a range of perceptions of and responses to events, allowing us a more rounded view of what occurs. But in *Frankenstein*, the device goes further than this. The connected narratives grow organically from one another: it is impossible to extricate them one from the other — the monster's narrative is part of Frankenstein's narrative and vice versa. Similarly, Frankenstein's narrative is subsumed within that of Walton.

Science fiction

While the actual form of science fiction as we know it today did not really emerge until some time later (Jules Verne's 1864 novel *Journey to*

the Centre of the Earth and H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* of 1895 being key early examples), Shelley's novel clearly has strong claims to be the first great science fiction novel. In its focus on dystopian possibilities, the heroic fantasy of the hero, its reliance on horror, the paranormal and scientific advance, it contains a wealth of the ingredients that define the science fiction genre.

Structure

The shape of the narrative

First consider the sequence of the narrative: Walton — Frankenstein — Monster — Frankenstein — Walton. The narrative might thus be perceived and interpreted in a number of ways.

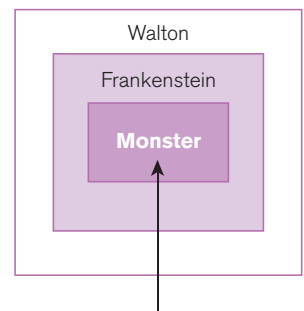
V-shaped

Walton **Walton**
Frankenstein **Frankenstein**
Monster

This suggests that Walton's narrative is the surface of the novel's events — it is the narrative 'present' with which the novel begins and ends. Below that surface lies Victor Frankenstein's tale — a cautionary tale relating to Walton's potential future. At the 'deepest' point of the tale lies the monster's narrative, embodying the deepest and darkest psychological forces of the novel. The V may thus suggest a descent into darkness and re-emergence from it. The open V also suggests an open-ended conclusion to the tale. We are left uncertain as to the monster's fate (has he indeed gone to his death at the North Pole?), and we are also uncertain of Walton's future. Frankenstein's highly ambiguous closing observations on scientific exploration leave us doubting whether Walton will heed the warning he has received.

Chinese boxes

This implies a new relationship between the narratives. Unlike the open-ended possibilities of the V shape, this view suggests a closed ending to the novel. Walton's tale, the frame narrative of the novel, encloses the narrative of Victor Frankenstein. The close parallels between the two men suggest close links between their narratives,



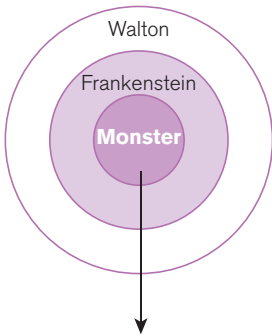


especially as Victor's narrative is scribed by Walton. The potential for Walton to become another Frankenstein adds significance to the enclosure of Victor's narrative within Walton's. Likewise, the monster's narrative is embedded within Frankenstein's. Again, this signals the inescapable ties between the two characters; as Frankenstein's creature, the monster's narrative cannot be read as distinct from Frankenstein's and vice versa.

Tellingly, the monster's narrative lies at the heart of the tale — to borrow a phrase from Joseph Conrad, it is the novel's 'heart of darkness', without which neither Frankenstein's nor Walton's narratives can stand. The concept of boxes also relates to Prometheus, who is sometimes linked to Pandora, from whose box emerged untold horrors. The monster can be seen as the forbidden 'box' at the heart of Shelley's tale, which Frankenstein foolishly opens, allowing horror and turmoil to spill out into the world.

Concentric rings

As in the previous model, the monster's narrative is completely enclosed within Frankenstein's, which is enclosed within Walton's frame story. Again, this emphasises the inescapable interrelations and interactions between all three narratives and points to the monster as the core of *Frankenstein*. The rings, however, suggest a different direction in the narrative. Whereas the 'V' implies a linear movement through the novel, and the boxes imply a movement inwards from Walton through Frankenstein to the monster, this model implies a movement outwards from the monster, making him the driving force of the novel. The narratives are like a set of spreading rings on water. Walton's first sighting of the monster comes before he has even met Frankenstein, and therefore we see that the monster precedes Victor in Walton's imagination; it is the monster that drives Frankenstein's insane pursuit and fuels his desire for revenge; and it is the 'monster' of scientific ambition in Frankenstein that leads to the sorry events we see.



Linked narratives and narrators

Shelley links her three narratives closely, suggesting the significant connections between the tellers and their tales. These connections and parallels are explored extensively in the 'Pairings' section on pp. 30–33 of this guide. So detailed are the parallels between the lives of Walton, Frankenstein and the monster that we see their existences as integrally related. Indeed, in the case of the monster and Victor, the distinctions

between them become increasingly blurred until they can arguably be perceived as one — in the popular imagination, Frankenstein is often taken to be the name of the monster.

The close linking of Frankenstein and Walton is also highly significant, as it emphasises the danger Walton faces if he continues with his current course and attitudes. Victor also acts as a bridge between the monster and Walton. The monster is at the heart of both Frankenstein and Walton, encouraging a symbolic reading of their relationship — Shelley establishes an unholy trinity: rather than the biblical trinity of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, we have the father (Frankenstein), the son (Walton) and the unholy spirit (the monster).

Doubling of plot devices

It is not only in her use of characters that Shelley employs the device of doubling. Throughout the novel she doubles plot devices. This links to one of the great features of Gothic fiction — cyclical repetition. Through repetition and mutation, the way in which Shelley structures the text ensures that the tale has an inevitable and inescapable logic.

Listed below are some key examples of this:

- false accusations of murder against both Justine and Frankenstein
- the dumping of the monster's companion and Clerval in the Irish Sea
- Frankenstein's scientific exploration and Walton's scientific voyage
- the monster's rejection by society and the De Lacey's rejection
- the destruction of the monster's companion and of Elizabeth
- the traitorous betrayal of the monster by Frankenstein and the betrayal of the De Lacey's by Safie's father
- the novel's doubling of plot elements from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Paradise Lost* and the Prometheus myth

Paradise Lost and

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

These two great poems by Milton and Coleridge are both very significant in understanding *Frankenstein*. The plot structure of the novel is closely linked to the narrative of the poems, and at times the characters in Shelley's tale find themselves acting according to the dictates of these literary models.

Task 11

Consider the list of doubled plot devices and add any others you can think of. What effects does Shelley create through this paralleled structure of events?



Paradise Lost

Paradise Lost is one of the books the monster reads, and it powerfully influences his view of the world, but it is also a formative influence on the narrative as a whole. It is based on the story of Adam and Eve from Genesis. The poem tells of their creation, disobedience and consequent banishment from Paradise. It also tells the story of Satan, an angel who leads an attempted rebellion against God, and who is punished by being sent to hell. As an act of revenge against God, he causes the Fall of mankind by tempting Eve in the form of the serpent.

A number of detailed structural comparisons with *Frankenstein* are important. Like the devils after their failed rebellion against God, the monster is forced to forge a life for himself away from his creator (Book 1) and eventually seeks to avenge himself on his creator by attacking his most beloved (Book 2). Like Satan, the monster undertakes long, perilous journeys to fulfil his schemes (Book 3), resolving in the exact terms the monster uses ('Evil be thou my Good') to have his way. He is jealous because he can never possess the Paradise that Adam and Eve inhabit (Book 4). Frankenstein receives warnings from his father about his dangerous behaviour in the same way that Adam and Eve do from the angel Raphael (Book 5). Adam tells of his loneliness and his request for God to create him a companion, a situation which relates closely to the monster's (Book 8). After they fall to Satan's temptation, Adam and Eve fall into despair, aware that their disobedience has separated them from God — this is similar to Frankenstein's experience. Satan and the monster both gain their revenge (Book 9). Adam and Eve recognise what they have done and resolve to seek mercy (Book 10). By contrast, Frankenstein determines to pursue his own revenge on the monster, but in both texts the central characters are banished from Paradise because of their actions (Book 11).

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Structural influences also exist between *Frankenstein* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Walton, like the wedding guest, is accosted by a mentally unstable stranger who forces him to listen to his cautionary tale. Polar regions are significant in both tales, and both tale-tellers live in fear of their actions (Part 1). The mariner's ship, like Walton's, becomes dangerously entrapped in the ice, and the mariner himself, like Frankenstein, becomes an outcast because of his actions (Part 2). Death visits the ship, taking the mariner's companions from him one

by one, as Victor's family circle is removed from him by the monster (Part 3). The mariner cannot pray — a characteristic he shares with Victor — but at last, unlike Frankenstein, he is able to thank God and is released from his burden (Part 4). The becalmed ship is now able to move again and sails clear, as Walton is able to do once Frankenstein has died, and returns homeward (Parts 5 and 6). The mariner, like Frankenstein, is tormented by his experiences, which he is compelled to tell. The tale has an impact on the wedding guest, who returns to the feast 'a sadder and wiser man'. The influence of Frankenstein's tale on Walton is less clear.

Taking it Further

Find Gustave Doré's illustrations for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* using an internet search engine such as Google Images. Compare their settings and atmosphere to Walton's narrative. (One is on p. 64 of this guide.)

Language

Verbal ties — Victor and the monster

At a number of points in the novel, Shelley creates verbal ties between Frankenstein and the monster. Through such verbal echoes, Shelley emphasises the connections between creator and creature:

- The monster: 'I, like the archfiend, bore a hell within me' (p. 138). Compare this to Frankenstein's: 'I was cursed by some devil, and carried about with me my eternal hell' (p. 207).
- Shelley tellingly makes use of the word 'consummate' with regard to Frankenstein's wedding night — it is to be the night that the monster consummates his crime, as well as the night that Frankenstein and Elizabeth consummate their marriage. The double meaning in the word alerts us to two further 'marriages' — the marriage of death between the monster and Elizabeth (a direct act of revenge mirroring Frankenstein's destruction of the monster's companion) and the marriage of Frankenstein and his monster in deadly pursuit.
- Compare Frankenstein's: 'I would sell my life dearly, and not shrink from the conflict until my own life, or that of my adversary, was extinguished' (p. 198) to the monster's: 'you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us' (p. 102).

Shelley's use of this technique establishes the intimate connection between Frankenstein and his monster. Even though they are in many ways extremely isolated one from the other, Shelley uses verbal ties to emphasise the inescapable connections between the creator and his creature. Unconsciously, they think and speak in the same terms.



Biblical imagery

Biblical imagery lies at the heart of one of the key source texts for the novel, *Paradise Lost* (see pp. 43–44 of this guide). Shelley's use of biblical imagery and language, however, plays an important role in its own right. First note the nature of Shelley's tale of creation (Genesis) and apocalypse (Revelation) — the first and last books of the Bible. A number of key ideas from Genesis are significant:

- the story of God's creation
- the particular emphasis on the relationship between God and humanity
- the instruction for humanity to multiply and 'subdue' the world
- the temptation to challenge God's authority
- sin and the Fall of humanity
- banishment from the Garden of Eden
- the murderous relationship between Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve

The books of Revelation (sometimes called 'The Apocalypse') and Daniel are also significant, as examples of apocalyptic literature — literature that deals with events at the end of time:

- the concept of judgement
- war, death and destruction
- strange composite beasts
- the wrath of God against sinful humanity
- the promise of a coming heavenly state
- the battle between good and evil

Task 12

Make notes explaining how each of the ideas from the Bible listed relates to *Frankenstein*.

Frankenstein can also be seen as prophetic, a kind of wisdom literature. While she is not didactic in approaching her subject, Shelley has clear moral intentions. The words of the monster to his creator on the 'sea of ice' and elsewhere have the weighty tone of the prophetic books of the Old Testament. The monster, like the Old Testament prophets, warns Frankenstein starkly of how he should behave. He offers him alternatives, one of which will lead to redemption, while the other must lead to death and destruction for one or both of them. Frankenstein ironically comes to see himself as humanity's only potential saviour, but in seeking to destroy the monster and to prevent the furtherance of his species by refusing to create a companion, he seals his own fate. Redemption and salvation, such central principles of the biblical message, play a very different role in *Frankenstein*.

Language of heaven and hell

Gothic often makes use of opposites and contrasts. The ultimate contrast in Christian tradition is between heaven, the perfection of union with God, and hell, the eternal torment of separation from God. Shelley frequently employs the language of heaven and hell in the course of the novel. Frankenstein often uses hellish language in referring to the monster — ‘the fiend’, ‘diabolical’. Almost by way of compensation, he uses heavenly language in the context of his mother and Elizabeth, who represent for him (in terms of their femininity, their caring natures, their love and their beauty) everything that he will not allow the monster to be.

Task 13

Find a selection of examples of Shelley’s use of the language of heaven and hell. Analyse their effect.