The outline of the plot of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's first novel, Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus, is known to almost everyone on the planet. Of no other science fiction novel can such a claim be made. A scientist, rejecting outmoded theories and superstitions, turns to research, and patches together a new but monstrous human being from corpses. Into this new being he manages to instill life. This unholy experiment goes wrong. The scientist is negligent. The monster runs amok, bringing death and destruction on scientist and family, and almost everyone else, before retribution comes.

This story, a type of scientific fairytale, has amused or troubled the world since the novel was first published, in 1818. The name of the scientist, Victor Frankenstein, has become synonymous with irresponsible applications of science and technology. The label Frankenstein has become synonymous with a type of period horror film.

In recent years Mary Shelley's novel has been read with renewed critical attention. Although the author's stated aim was "to curdle the blood," her novel is much more than an exercise in horror. Its period flavour, acquired over well nigh two centuries, has led us to forget how topical were some of its elements. For Mary Shelley it was who developed literary methods followed ever since by SF writers. That is to say, she embraces topicality by framing her story in a tale of polar exploration, a subject of intense current interest following Captain Cook's failed attempt to find a North West passage. Also, the novel discusses themes then as now of vital interest, such as the upbringing of children. Other ingredients, such as the quest for the secrets of "life" and debates as to whether "life" could be isolated, were topical at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and have
become so again in an age looking for the secrets of AIDS.

This farsightedness and its continued relevance, wedded to its awful story of vengeance, accounts for Frankenstein's perennial appeal. But it is that basic theme of Man preempting God's work which marks it out as the first true work of science fiction. This is no casual adventure: what was under nature's control is now under human control. Superstition is rejected, science is espoused--and this in an age before the word "scientist" was coined. Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus is now recognised as a master work, and much more than Gothic sensationalism, as it was previously categorised.

The horror theme--the monster rising from its slab and clobbering everyone in sight--has been used over and over, on stage, radio, and film. Most people are familiar with Boris Karloff's make-up as Frankenstein's unnamed creature. But the old films made the creature dumb, a bellower at best, whereas much of the book's charm and interest lies in the creature's self-education, combined with the eloquence of its diction--an eloquence owing something to Milton's Paradise Lost, as befits the artificially created Adam. So an old brutality was substituted for a new way of life.

The book is subtle, fluid, elusive, ultimately defying analysis—hence the many analyses it has engendered. In The Sacred Wood, T.S. Eliot says of Shakespeare's play Hamlet, "Hamlet, like the Sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art." He adds, "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear." As much can be said of Frankenstein.

Perhaps for this reason, we turn for clues to the inner meaning of the novel to the author herself. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin had two illustrious parents, intellectuals of their age, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. Remarkably, their daughter was only 18, and not yet married to the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, when, in the June of 1816, she began her story. It opened with a dream--a dream prompted in part by listening to scientific discussions. The dreamer awoke and began to write: "It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils...."

The young Godwin lady was living at the time with Shelley in postbellum Switzerland (itself patched together into a new national entity). Shelley was a married man, father of two children. Before Frankenstein was published, Mary's half-sister, Fanny Imlay, committed suicide, as did Shelley's wife, Harriet. Death and insecurity surrounded her. Her mother had died in childbirth; her first child, a daughter, was born to her when she was seventeen and died a few days later. Her father all but disowned her when she eloped
with the poet.

The horrific elements of the novel obscured the way in which it deals with problems of parent-child relationships, families, the usages of power, justice, and, as importantly, scientific questions. In her edition of the 1818 text of Frankenstein (London, 1993), Marilyn Butler shows how closely the Shelleys followed the science of their day. In particular, a young physiologist and surgeon, William Lawrence, was involved in the vitalist arguments of the day, and became their friend. In a lecture given on the Life question in 1817, Lawrence declares that "an immaterial and spiritual being could not have been discovered among the blood and filth of the dissecting room." The phraseology--similar to Mary Shelley's own--takes us back to an aura of grave-robbing and vivisection then prevalent, the very practices of which Victor Frankenstein is guilty. In Butler's words, key passages in the novel "encode scientific experiments ... and phrases identifiable with other living experimenters and theorists are introduced...."

Equal weight is given to the question of emotional relationships. Victor's poor patched creature, disowned by its creator, shunned by mankind, embodies many of its author's own orphaned feelings of sorrow, guilt, and rage. As Mary Shelley states in the Introduction to the 1831 edition of her novel, "Invention ... does not consist of creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded...."

The story unfolds. Our sympathies are transposed from Victor to his "daemon," as he sometimes calls it. Victor and his creation, locked in a struggle to the death, play out modern dilemmas, pity and the lack of it, overwhelming ambition, secrecy, science as opposed to religion, and male principle as opposed to female.

A doppelganger theme intensifies towards the end of the novel. The roles of pursuer and pursued become confused. A homoerotic theme can be discerned, as enemies become strange allies. Victor and his creature have between them destroyed all the women in pursuit of their large ambitions.

This interchange of roles affords some expression of Mary Shelley's double life, the internal and the external. In her Journals, she speaks of herself as one who "entirely and despotically engrossed by their own feelings, leads--as it were--an internal life quite different from the outward and apparent one." While Victor shuns society, his creature craves it. Thus their author dramatises the two sides of her nature.

The issues raised in Frankenstein still divert or torment us, while the novel forms an exemplar of what SF can and should be.

The awesome solitudes of the novel, which lend it grandeur, are lacking in crowded
Frankenstein movies, swarming as they are with villains, hunchbacks, and peasants brandishing flaming torches. The text gives no warrant for such claptrap. There we find only the majestic desolations of the Alps, the wilderness of Scotland, the mer de glace, the polar ice.

This note of profound isolation sounds again in Mary Shelley's other SF novel, The Last Man. It is a more prolix work which concerns a plague coming out of the East. Mankind is gradually and cumulatively wiped out, until only Lionel Verney is left to tell the tale.

Again, extrapolation is part of the authorial procedure. A real pandemic was scourging much of the globe in the 1820s. Hundreds of thousands of people died in that underpopulated world. As before, Mary Shelley downloads her feelings, reflecting the darkening circumstances she endured after Shelley's death by drowning. Three of her four children had died young; she had suffered a serious miscarriage from which she almost expired. Lord Byron, her famous friend, had died fighting for Greek liberty. She lived in poverty in London, supporting herself and her son Percy by her pen.

The Last Man will never secure the audience accorded its unique predecessor. Indeed, the Hogarth Press edition of 1985, with my Introduction, was its first English reprint. Yet the story yields much of pleasureable interest to sympathetic readers. The theme itself has weight enough, not least in an age facing AIDS.

Mary Shelley's reputation continues to grow as she is increasingly studied. Beyond the SF field, Frankenstein has become accepted as one of the seminal works of the Romantic period. It is that paradoxical thing: academically accepted, popularly enjoyed. The tragic life of its young author has a separate and continued appeal. There's no one like her.


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