

13 Ways of Reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

1. EMBATTLED TEXT. Unresolved questions remain about the primacy of the 1818 and 1831 texts, and about the significance of manuscript changes. John Lauritsen (2007) argues that the real author is Percy Shelley, and the theme is Male Friendship.
2. "MODERN PROMETHEUS." – MYTHIC READINGS. There are at least two major versions of the Prometheus myth relevant to interpretations of this book. In Ovid, Prometheus is the Creator of Man, analogous to the Christian God of Genesis. In Aeschylus' tragedy, Prometheus is the fire-bringer and friend of mankind who defied Zeus and suffered for it. This last figure became a Romantic image (cf. Byron's poem) of heroic rebellion against absolute authority. Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* resolves all.
3. RELIABLE AND UNRELIABLE NARRATION. The author has adopted the narrative device of epistolary dramatization. There is no Authorial "I," thus increasing irony and limiting didacticism. --- "The method of inseting tale within tale suggests that the nature of narrative is fragmented, disjointed, incoherent—'coherence' is supplied by the reader." (Susan Wolstenholme) ---In addition, Frankenstein/Walton create an "interpreted design" pattern of Transcendent/lesser figure (as in Ahab/Ishmael, Gatsby/Nick, etc.).
4. GHOST STORY. This was Byron's announced challenge met by the writer. In this "tale of terror," the Creature (beyond a few details) is unnameable, indescribable—even beyond Dante! . . .this is frightening. --- Sexual violation is a background fear, and also the possible creation of a race of monsters, or of human/alien hybrids, etc. --- Some have argued that Mary's dead mother is the only "ghost" in the narrative. ----The Creature as serial murderer. – The fear of Inscrutability (Lipking).
5. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL/ALLEGORICAL. Characterizations are derived from Mary's experience as a guilty mother, and from her relationship to her parents and husband-to-be. This work is a "birth-myth" (Moers). – "Hideous progeny" is the author's own description of the book she wrote, hinting at an even wider allegory of the Artist.
6. THE DOUBLE. Narcissistic (and ironic!) fictional doubling occurs between Victor/Creature. This can also function homoerotically, and/or as an escape from marriage with Elizabeth. Additional doubles: Victor/Nerval, and Victor/Walton. This is a dramatization of the "split personality" with no middle ground (Poe, Stevenson, Conrad).
7. FREUDIAN. The Freudian dreamwork appears in suggestive use of dreams, like that of Victor on the evening of the Creation – in the pattern of oedipal rebellion against paternal authority – in the violent actions resulting from repression.

8. FEMINIST. Mary Shelley not only indicts masculine ambition, but exposes the compulsive character of masculine science (Brian Easlea) ---The book's main theme is the aspiration of modern masculinist scientists to be technically creative divinities (Maurice Hindle).
9. LANDSCAPE AS SYMBOL. The Alpine and Arctic scenes are objective correlatives of the human heart.
10. VERSIONS OF MILTON, ROUSSEAU, AND COLERIDGE. The crucial importance of Milton's *Paradise Lost* is argued by Gilbert and Gubar. Rousseau's ideal of compassionate education in *Emile* is deliberately invoked in the tale of the Creature. The murder of the albatross in Coleridge's *Rime* is connected to the characterization of both protagonists. Other connections have been made to William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, and Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*.
11. HISTORICIST READINGS have traced contemporary scientific advances by Erasmus Darwin and Humphry Davy, and by experimenters with electricity like Franklin, Volta, and Galvani. Backgrounds of alchemists mentioned in the novel (Paracelsus et al), tales of the Golem, etc. Add social theories of Godwin and Locke here.
12. MARXIST. Both Frankenstein and the Creature challenge patriarchal authority (cf. # 6 above). Recently, the Creature has also been identified with revolutionary figures, including workers, slaves, mobs, and the Irish. -- Frankenstein's own revolutionary sensibility extends not only to challenging the idea of limitations on experiment, thought, and reason, but to challenging female generative power.
13. CONVENTIONAL/THEOLOGICAL READING. Frankenstein is guilty of the sin of Pride. The novel explores the dangers of seeking "forbidden knowledge" (Roger Shattuck), tying the book to the Faust legend dramatized in the plays by Marlowe and Goethe. We are also at the lowest level of Dante's *Inferno*: Fraud. The true evil of the scientist (the "mad scientist" of Hawthorne and Melville?) is to obscure his masculinist hatred of both "fathers" and "women" with a mask of benevolence for humanity.