Shelley's Frankenstein by Graham Allen, a study guide.

CHAPTER 1 CONTEXTS

Frankenstein; Or the Modern Prometheus, first published in 1818, is one of the most influential literary texts to have been written in English. It is a novel which is deeply embedded in that cultural and political period we call Romantic, and has been described by William St Clair as Romanticism's most persistently influential literary work (St Clair, The Reading Nation, p. 357). From its first publication, however, Frankenstein was more than just another novel, and Chris Baldick has rightly called it 'a modern myth' (Baldick, p. 1). There appears to be something about Frankenstein which encourages every generation to read it in terms of their historically specific anxieties and obsessions. The mythic element of Frankenstein, as Baldick explains, resides in this incitement to re-reading and revision, and in what it produces: 'That series of adaptations, allusions, accretions, analogues, parodies, and plain misreading's which follows upon Mary Shelley's novel is not just a supplementary component of the myth; it is the myth' (Baldick, p. 4). From the earliest moral- izing reviews and theatrical adaptations, through a century of allusions and retellings into the filmic and televisual obsession with the text in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it would appear that Frankenstein has been a text (a story, an idea, a series of images and narrative set pieces) which has provided British, European and, increasingly, global cultures with ways of examining and explaining themselves. The distance between such re- readings and the original text (or texts) of the novel can become strikingly large, so that many readers (saturated with cultural 1 references to Shelley's most famous work) can find the novel itself, when they finally read it, rather surprising and unexpectedly detached from its numerous cultural versions. When students are confronted with Frankenstein, they are immediately faced with questions that go to the very heart of literary and cultural studies. The most pressing questions concern whether or not readers should attempt to return to the original text and its immediate historical contexts, or whether they should address the many meanings the novel has provoked throughout what is now almost two centuries of reception. Frankenstein, as we will see, was published in various editions. Mary Shelley altered a significant portion of the novel for the 1831 Standard Novels edition. Frankenstein, then, is not a singular entity. There is no single, stable text to which we can return. Even if we decide, as readers, that we wish to return to the 'true' (original, authentic, authorially intended) Frankenstein, we discover we have to negotiate between texts and, as Chapter 4 will also explain, even between authors. As Fred Botting has suggested, there is some- thing about Frankenstein that radically foregrounds the often hidden but still active desire for mastery in traditional forms of literary criticism. The story's focus on how the desire for mastery leads to the production of, and conflict with, monstrous doubles is played out again, Botting suggests, in every attempt to master the meaning of Shelley's text critically (Botting, Making Monstrous, p. 5). Reading Frankenstein involves us in an education about monsters. We may begin by imagining monsters on a purely Gothic level (huge lumbering figures of the Boris Karloff type); the novel, however, very quickly teaches us that monsters also exist on the psychological, the ethical and the politico-social level.

Many of Frankenstein's modern readers have explored the relationship the novel draws between monsters and the social process of othering. This process of othering, of making monstrous (to use Botting's phrase), can involve aspects of life and the world which are psychical, social, sexual, ethnic, class-based. Those in positions of power (masters), so such readings contend, inevitably attempt to other (turn into images of the non-human, or the inauthentic or illegitimate) those aspects of society and human life which SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN 2 threaten the dominant social order. At the very centre of the text, of course, the creature himself goes through this education about monsters, not only learning of how his own creator had othered him, but even more tragically how such processes of repression and distortion seem inescapable within human history and human social systems. Having listened to Felix read Volney's Ruins of Empire (1791) to Safie, the Christian-Arab girl who seeks protection in the De Lacey home, the creature reflects on the ambivalent nature of humanity, and on how what is great and glorious in the human sphere always appears to be achieved at the cost of a monstrous othering of those outside of the realms of power and influence: These wonderful narrations inspired me with strange feelings. Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? He appeared at one time a mere scion of the evil principle, and at another as all that can be conceived of noble and godlike. To be a great and virtuous man appeared the highest honour that can befall a sensitive being; to be base and vicious, as many on record have been, appeared the lowest degradation, a condition more abject than that of the blind mole or harmless worm. For a long time I could not conceive how one man could go forth to murder his fellow, or even why there were laws and governments; but when I heard details of vice and bloodshed, my wonder ceased, and I turned away with disgust and loathing. (1818, vol. 2, pp. 77–9; see B, pp. 144–5) Frankenstein is a novel which explores the manner in which human beings create monsters and become monsters: it is also a novel which has become a myth-making monster which still, to this day, threatens to other its own creator, Mary Shelley. In her 1831 Introduction, Shelley playfully acknowledges the monstrous independence her novel appears to have gained in the world, but she also implicitly regrets the manner in which her textual creature has propelled a misreading of her own life and private emotions into the public arena. The myths produced by her most famous novel had, by the 1830s, also begun . . .

Greatly need a friend who would have sense enough not to despise me as romantic, and affection enough for me to endeavour to regulate my mind. (1818, vol. 1, pp. 11–13; see B, p. 53) Frankenstein is a novel with a complex narrative structure. It has a frame narrative – we begin and end with Walton, on his failed expedition to reach the North Pole, writing home to his sister, Margaret Walton Saville. Frankenstein also employs layered narration, presenting us with the creature's story framed by and contained within Victor's story, which is itself framed by and contained within Walton's epistolary text. This combination of layered and frame narration produces a complex blurring of narrative boundaries. Victor presents to Walton the creature's story; the creature only speaks directly to Walton at the very end of the novel. Victor's story is also presented in a collaborative fashion. We learn near the novel's end that Victor has 'corrected and augmented' the notes Walton has taken

while listening to Victor's story. Victor explains to Walton: 'Since you have pre- served my narrative . . . I would not that a mutilated one should go down to posterity' (1818, vol. 3, p. 157; see B, p. 232). Victor appears concerned about the believability of his narrative. Indeed, Walton remarks that it is 'the strangest tale that ever imagination formed' (1818, vol. 3, p. 157; see B, p. 232) and that it was only the physical evidence of the letters of Felix and Safie and sight of the creature that convinced him of its truth (1818, vol. 3, p. 156; see B, p. 231; see also Zonana). Victor's anxiety about the narrative he has given to Walton also concerns the motivation behind it, which is very clearly to vindicate his own character. The same can be said of the creature's narrative and his final words to Walton, however. Narrative in Frankenstein appears inextricably linked to issues of responsibility and justice. The novel's complexity and openness to interpretation derives, in part, from the fact that Walton, Victor and the creature are unreliable narrators (narrators whose concerns are for self-vindication rather than accuracy or objectivity). Narrative is a weapon in a rhetorical conflict over responsibility and justice in Frankenstein. Mutilation – if we take that word as a metaphor for injustice (the mutilation of the truth) – appears to mark. . .

well managed – but [Thomas Potter] Cooke played —'s part extremely well – his seeking as it were for support – his trying to grasp at the sounds he heard – all indeed he does was well imagined & executed. I was much amused, & it appeared to excite a breathless eagerness in the audience . . . & all stayed till it was over. They continue to play it even now. (Mary Shelley, Letters, vol. 1, p. 378) Peake's Presumption was indeed a 'prodigious success'; it was performed 37 times in its first 1823 run and went on to be regularly revived up until the 1840s (Forry, pp. 10–11). Presumption is a melodrama, and as such it radically alters Shelley's novel, helping to begin the process of creating that alternative version of Frankenstein which developed alongside the novel's reception for the next two centuries. In Peake's play the nameless creature is returned back to his stock position as a non-speaking 'monster', the laboratory assistant Fritz (so important in the later films) is introduced, along with a number of tableaux which will influence many of the later theatrical adaptations and eventually the twentieth-century film versions. For example, in Act 1, scene 3, as Fritz peeps into Frankenstein's blue-lit laboratory through a 'small lattice window', his master is heard to exclaim 'It lives! It lives!', a scene which James Whale's 1931 film version will take from offstage and place at the visual centre of the cinematic tradition of Frankenstein adaptations (see Forry, p. 143). Peake's foregrounding of the word 'presumption' from the 1818 text helped to establish a tradition of moralizing and Christianizing the story by, in equal parts, silencing the creature's pleas for sympathy and justice, and turning Victor himself into an exercise in the classic, male overreacher. Peake's play inspired a series of melodramatic and burlesque versions of the story, including John Atkinson Kerr's The Monster and Magician; or, The Fate of Frankenstein and Henry M. Milner's The Man and the Monster; or, The Fate of Frankenstein (1826). Forry, in his excellent study of the history of stage adaptations of Frankenstein, lists 16 different theatrical adaptations from 1821 to 1826, nine of them in the year 1826, and 19 in all up to the end of the 1880s (see also Morton, Frankenstein Sourcebook . . .

Part of the creature in the most important 1820s theatrical versions. In the twentieth century, of course, this visualization of Shelley's novel continued, but now in the context of a century in which the visual image came to dominate human society as never before. Glut and Florescu provide excellent guides to the numerous Frankenstein films produced in the twentieth century, and from their work, along with other studies, it is possible to discern within the daunting, international variety of cinematic adaptations a number of cycles in this tradition. There seems to be something about Shelley's novel which makes film-makers and audiences return to it again and again. Early pioneers of the moving image, for example, seem to have recognized that the emerging art of cinema possessed a literary correlative in Victor's animation of his creature. Glut discusses the Thomas A. Edison film company's 1910 silent Frankenstein, with its disturbing representation of the creature played by Charles Ogle (Glut, pp. 58–63). He then goes on to discuss the Ocean Film Corporation's 1915 Life without Soul before examining the manner in which German-based cinema, in the 1910s and 1920s, produced a series of related Golem films (in which an artificial man is animated into life), the most important of which remains the 1920s Der Golem: Wieer in die Welt Kam ('The Golem: How He Came Into The World'), directed and starring Paul Wegener (Glut, pp. 63–7, 67–85). The most abiding testament to the manner in which the idea of Frankensteinian animation spoke to the earliest film-makers and audiences, however, probably lies in a film which does not directly cite Shelley's novel, Fritz Lang's Metropolis (1926) with its mad scientist Rotwang creating a subversive female robot, Maria, in a compellingly visualized futuristic world. Metropolis requires mention here because its influence can be registered throughout the rest of the century and into the twenty-first century. This influence concerns film's ability to combine the representation of artificial life with hypothetical, but sometimes brilliantly realized, future worlds in which the borders between humanity and technology are radically shifted and even broken down. We will return to that cinematic tradition at the end of this chapter when we discuss the broader social and cultural influence of Frankenstein. . .

The second discernible wave of Frankenstein films centres on the work produced by the US Company Universal Pictures, in the 1930s and the 1940s. The story of how James Whale, the young British director in Hollywood, came to film Boris Karloff's iconic version of Shelley's creature has become part of film history. Karloff's heavy, angular make-up, created by Jack Pierce, has itself become a cultural myth which it is quite impossible to avoid or forget. Colin Clive's hysterical rendition of [Henry] Frankenstein's act of creation, transforming Peake's version into a maniacal 'It's alive! It's alive!', is also an enduring moment of cinematic history, produced as it is in a laboratory in which science now appears to be spiralling out of control. A very rewarding discussion of the manner in which the Universal films developed the nineteenth-century theatrical adaptations of Shelley's novel is provided in Albert J. Lavalley's 'The Stage and Film Children of Frankenstein'. The 1931 Universal film inaugurated what we might call the modern Frankenstein industry. Universal studios in the next two decades produced a series of Frankenstein films, beginning with the superior Bride of Frankenstein (1935) (also starring Karloff and directed by Whale), on to Son of Frankenstein (1939) and a number of other 1940s remakes in which various horror figures (such as the Wolfman, Dracula, and the

Mummy) are brought into sometimes humorous, frequently parodic collisions, and the bankable talents of comedy duo Abbot and Costello are also let loose on material less to do with horror and more to do with spoof and slapstick. If we understand Whale's two Universal Frankenstein films as adaptations of Shelley's novel, then the obvious question becomes what new, contemporary meaning is generated by these films' re-reading or re-visioning of the original novel (and of course the theatrical tradition which mediates in between)? To what socio-political contexts do Whale's two films adapt the story of Frankenstein? Esther Schor states that these 'films both reflect and refract their own historical moment . . . In the history of Frankenstein films, we can trace a Rorschach – a psychologist's inkblot – of our collective fears' (Schor, p. 64). She goes on to argue that Whale's films concern racism and lynching (in the case of Frankenstein), and eugenics. . .