

# Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

## (1797-1851) - original surname Godwin

English Romantic novelist, biographer and editor, best known as the writer of *FRANKENSTEIN, OR, THE MODERN PROMETHEUS* (1818). Mary Shelley was 21 when the book was published; she started to write it when she was 18. The story deals with an ambitious young scientist. He creates life but then rejects his creation, a monster.

**"But success shall crown my endeavours. Wherefore not? Thus far I have gone, tracking a secure way over the pathless seas: the very stars themselves being witnesses and testimonies of my triumph. Why not still proceed over the untamed yet obedient element? What can stop the determined heart and resolved will of man?"** (from *Frankenstein*)

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was born in London. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, died of puerperal fever 10 days after giving birth to her daughter. Mary's labor lasted 18 hours and then it took four hours to remove the rest of the placenta. She was one of the first feminists, the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), and the novel *The Wrongs of Woman*, in which she wrote: "We cannot, without depraving our minds, endeavour to please a lover or husband, but in proportion as he pleases us." In the intellectual circles of London, her acquaintances included the painter Henry Fuseli, Erasmus Darwin, Charles's grandfather, and William Blake, who illustrated an edition of her book, *Original Stories from Real Life*.

Mary Shelley's father was the writer and political journalist William Godwin, who became famous with his work *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793). Godwin had revolutionary attitudes to most social institutions, including marriage. In feminism he found an "amazonian" element. Among his other books is *Things as They Are, or The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794).

In her childhood Mary Shelley was left to educate herself amongst her father's intellectual circle, the critic Hazlitt, the essayist Lamb, the poet Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley, who came into Godwin's circle in 1812. Godwin took a second wife in 1801, but Mary never learned to like her. In 1812 Godwin sent her to live in Dundee. Mary published her first poem at the age of ten.

At the age of 16 she ran away to France and Switzerland with Shelley; they had met at the end of 1812. Percy and Mary married in 1816 - Shelley's wife Harriet had committed suicide by drowning. Their first child, a daughter, died in Venice, Italy, a few years later. In

HISTORY OF SIX WEEKS TOUR (1817) the Shelleys jointly recorded their life. Thereafter they returned to England and Mary gave birth to a son, William.

**The story of Frankenstein started on summer in 1816**, when Mary joined with Percy Shelley and Claire Clairmont near Geneva Lord Byron. She took a challenge, set by Lord Byron, to write a ghost story. With her husband's encouragement, she completed the novel within a year. At the Villa Diodati she had been a "silent listener" of her husband and Byron, who discussed about **galvanism**\*. At Eton College Shelley had become interested in Luigi Galvani's experiments with electric shocks to make dead frogs' muscles twitch. It is possible that his teacher, James Lind, had demonstrated the technique to Shelley. Byron and Shelley talked about Dr. Erasmus Darwin's experiments making a piece of vermicelli move. (*Note: Erasmus Darwin was the grandfather of Charles Darwin*)

*\*galvanism = In biology, galvanism is the contraction of a muscle that is stimulated by an electric current. The term is also used to describe the bringing to life of organisms using electricity, as popularly associated with Mary Shelley's work Frankenstein, and people still speak of being 'galvanized into action'.*

In her 'Introduction' to the 1831 edition Mary revealed that she got the story from a dream, in which she saw "the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with a uneasy, half vital motion."

## FRANKENSTEIN; OR, THE MODERN PROMETHEUS (1818)

The novel start with series of letters from Robert Walton to his sister. Walton is an English Arctic explorer who spots a strange creature on a dog-sled. The exhausted Victor Frankenstein arrives, in pursuit of the creature and while recuperating tells his story.

He has been born into a wealthy Geneva family. After his mother dies of scarlet fever, he becomes a student of natural philosophy and medicine. Inspired by occult philosophy and the teaching of his mentor, Waldman, he builds a creature in the semblance of a man and gives it life. Its body is assembled from parts which Frankenstein has stolen from butcher shops, dissecting rooms, and charnel-houses. The creature is repeatedly rejected by those who see it, but the monster proves intelligent, and later highly articulate.

Receiving no love, it becomes embittered. Frankenstein deserts his creation, who disappears. "I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I have deprived myself of rest and

health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I have finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart." (from *Frankenstein*)

Frankenstein hears that his younger brother has been strangled, but Justine, his family's servant confesses the murder. However, later the monster tells that he murdered William and framed Justine. Frankenstein then agrees to make a mate for the monster so that it will not bother anyone again. However, a wave of remorse makes Frankenstein destroy the female before it is completed. The lone creature swears revenge. He kills Frankenstein's bride, Elizabeth, on their wedding night. The scientist becomes mad, but recovers and chases the creature across the world. The two confront in the Arctic wastes.

Frankenstein dies. The creature describes eloquently to Walton his efforts to seek out beauty and how crime has degraded it beneath the meanest animal. "He is dead who called me into being; and when I shall be no more the very remembrance of us both will speedily vanish. I shall no longer see the sun or stars, or feel the wind play on my cheeks. Light, feeling, and sense will pass away; and in this condition must I find my happiness." The monster leaps from the ship on a ice-raft, disappearing again in the darkness.

The novel contains no supernatural elements; the creation of the monster is described in the third edition on a rational scientific basis. Frankenstein is a scientist who challenges the Creator of the world with the possibilities of modern science, but is destroyed because he cannot anticipate the outcomes of his own acts. The story has also been interpreted as an exploration of the artist's - creator's - relation to society.

**The first edition of book** had an unsigned preface by Percy Shelley. Many thought that it is also his novel, disbelieving that only 19-year-old woman could write such horror story. However, when the book was published in 1818, it became a huge success, although it received mixed reviews. John Wilson Croker wrote in *Quarterly Review* (January 1818) that "the dreams of insanity are embodied in the strong and striking language of the insane, and the author, notwithstanding the rationality of his preface, often leaves us in doubt whether he is not as mad as his hero." Sir Walter Scott, on the other hand, noted that the work was "written in plain and forcible English, without exhibiting the mixture of hyperbolic Germanisms with which tales of wonder are usually told" (*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, March 1818).

In 1818 the Shelleys left England for Italy, where they remained until Percy Shelley's death - he drowned during a heavy squall on July 28, 1822, in the Bay of Spezia near Livorno. In 1819 Mary suffered a nervous breakdown after the death of her son William - he died of malaria at the age

of 3. Mary had also lost a daughter the previous year. In 1822 she had a dangerous miscarriage and she believed that she would die.

Mary Shelley wrote to her friend Maria Gisborne about this loss and her husband's death, concluding the letter: "Well here is my story - the last story I shall have to tell - all that might have been bright in my life is now despoiled - I shall live to improve myself, to take care of my child, & render myself worthy to join him. Soon my weary pilgrimage will begin - I rest now - but soon I must leave Italy -". Of their children only one, Percy Florence, survived infancy.

In 1823 Mary returned with her son to England, determined not to re-marry. She devoted herself to his welfare and education and continued her career as a professional writer. Sir Timothy Shelley, her father-in-law, was not eager to help her and her son Percy financially. Mary Shelley never married, but she flirted with the young French writer Prosper Merimee, and hoped to marry Maj. Aubrey Beauclerk.

None of Shelley's novels from this period matched the power of her first legendary achievement. Her later works include *LODORE* (1835) and *FAULKNER* (1937), both romantic pot-boilers, and unfinished *MATHILDE* (1819, published 1959), which draws on her relations with Godwin and Shelley. *VALPERGA* (1823) is a romance set in the 14th-century, and *THE LAST MAN* (1826), set in the 21st century republican England, depicts the end of human civilization. Its second part describes the gradual destruction of the human race by plague. The narrator is Lionel Verney, the last man of the title, living amidst the ruins of Rome. Feminist critics have paid attention to its fantasy of the total corrosion of patriarchal order.

Shelley gave up writing long fiction when realism started to gain popularity, exemplified in the works of Charles Dickens. She wrote a numerous short stories for popular periodicals, particularly *The Keepsaker*, produced several volumes of *Lives* for Lardner's *Cabinet Cyclopedia*, and the first authoritative edition of Shelley's poems (1839, 4 vols.). Shelley's well-received travelogue *RAMBLES IN GERMANY AND ITALY* appeared in 1844. She also attempted a biography on Shelley but abandoned the work.

The story of Frankenstein's monster has inspired over 50 films. James Whale's version from 1931, starring Boris Karloff, is considered a classic, and became the major source for a number of other adaptations. "The film differs greatly from the book and soon turns into a sort of comic opera with a range of cardboard mountains over which extras in French Revolution costumes dash about with flaming torches." (Creighton Peet in *Outlook & Independent*, December 9, 1931)

Mel Brook's parody *Young Frankenstein* (1974), starring Gene Wilder in the role of the famous doctor, was beautifully photographed - Brooks used many archaic optical devices, including the old 1:85 aspect ratio for height and width of the frame. The film received an Academy Award nomination for its script. Among its highlights is the scene in which Peter Boyle as the monster visits a well-meaning, lonely blind man, Gene Hackman, who nearly manages to destroy his guest.

Kenneth's Branagh's film *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994) was faithful to the book. The director himself was Frankenstein and Robert De Niro played the monster under a heavy mask.

## Characters in Frankenstein

The key characters in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* are Victor Frankenstein and his creation.

### Robert Walton:

An Arctic seafarer and adventurer. He writes letters to his sister, Mrs. Saville.

### Victor Frankenstein:

Protagonist and narrator. His tragic downfall, as he sees it, was brought about by his search for knowledge. From childhood, Victor has a thirst for knowledge and powerful ambition. These two traits lead him to study biology at university in Ingolstadt, where he eventually discovers the "secret of life" and then uses that knowledge to create his own living being. But Frankenstein cannot stand his creation's ugliness. Victor's abandonment of his "monster" creates a cycle of guilt, anger, and destruction, in which first the monster takes vengeance upon Victor, and then Victor swears vengeance on the monster. In the end, Victor resembles the monster he hates far more than he would care to imagine.

*Chapter 1: "I was their plaything and their idol, and something better--their child, the innocent and helpless creature bestowed on them by Heaven, whom to bring up to good, and whose future lot it was in their hands to direct to happiness or misery, according as they fulfilled their duties towards me."*

### Elizabeth Lavenza:

An orphaned young girl taken in by Victor's parents. She is passive, waiting for Victor's attentions. She marries Victor, and is murdered on their honeymoon.

*Chapter 1: "Every one loved Elizabeth. The passionate and almost reverential attachment with which all regarded her became, while I shared it, my pride and my delight. On the evening previous to her being brought to my home, my mother had said playfully--'I have a pretty present for my Victor--to-morrow he shall have it.' And when, on the*

*morrow, she presented Elizabeth to me... to protect, love, and cherish."*

### Alphonse Frankenstein:

Victor's father. Offers encouragement and support.

### Caroline Beufort Frankenstein:

Victor's mother. Died of scarlet fever when Victor was 17.

### The Monster:

Victor Frankenstein's creation.

*Chapter 5: "I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed: when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch--the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, and rushed down stairs."*

*Chapter 10: "I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king, if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owest me. Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other, and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due. Remember, that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous."*

### Henry Clerval:

Victor Frankenstein's friend and companion. Victor is questioned when Henry is murdered.

### William Frankenstein:

Victor's younger brother. The Monster takes his revenge on his creator by strangling William.

### Justine Moritz:

A young girl also taken in by the Frankensteins. Accused of Henry's murder, she is hanged and becomes a martyr.

**M. Waldman:** Professor of Chemistry.

**M. Krempe:** Professor of Philosophy.

**Mr. Kirwin:** Magistrate.

### Selected works:

- HISTORY OF SIX WEEK'S TOUR, 1817 (with Percy Bysshe Shelley)
- FRANKENSTEIN; OR THE MODERN PROMETHEUS, 1818 (3 vols.) - Frankenstein: uusi Prometeus (suom. Paavo Lehtonen, 1973) - films: 1931, dir. by James Whale; sequel The Bride of Frankenstein (1935), dir. by James Whale; Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1994), dir. by Kenneth Branagh - **see the film list below**
- VALPERGA, 1823 (3 vols.)
- editor: POSTHUMOUS POEMS BY PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY, 1824
- THE LAST MAN, 1826 (3 vols.)
- THE FORTUNES OF PERKIN WARBECK, 1830 (3 vols.)
- LODORE, 1835 (3 vols.)
- FALKNER, 1837 (3 vols.)
- ESSAYS, LETTERS FROM ABROAD, 1840 (ed. by Percy Bysshe Shelley)
- RAMBLES IN GERMANY AND ITALY IN 1840, 1842 AND 1843, 1844 (2 vols.)
- THE CHOICE: A POEM ON SHELLEY'S DEATH, 1876 (ed. H. Buxton Forman)
- TALES AND SHORT STORIES, 1891 (ed. by Richard Garnett)
- LETTERS, MOSTLY UNPUBLISHED, 1918 (ed. by Henry H. Harper)
- PROSERPINE AND MIDAS, 1922 (ed. by André Henri Koszul)
- HARRIET AND MARY, 1944 (ed. by Walter Sidney Scott)
- LETTERS, 1944 (2 vols., ed. by Frederick L. Jones)
- JOURNAL, 1947 (ed. by Frederick L. Jones)
- MY BEST MARY: SELECTED LETTERS, 1953 (ed. by Muriel Spark and Derek Stanford)
- MATILDA, 1959 (ed. by Elizabeth Nitchie)
- SHELLEY'S POSTHUMOUS POEMS, 1969 (ed. by Irving Massey)
- COLLECTED TALES AND SHORT STORIES, 1976 (ed. by Charles E. Robinson)
- THE LETTERS OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY, 1983 (3 vols., ed. by Betty T. Bennett)
- JOURNALS OF MARY SHELLEY 1814-1844, 1987 (2 vols., ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert)
- THE MARY SHELLEY READER, 1990 (ed. by Betty T. Bennett and Charles E. Robinson)
- SELECTED LETTERS OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY, 1995

### Frankenstein films:

- FRANKENSTEIN, 1931, dir. James Whale
- THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN, 1935, dir. James Whale
- SON OF FRANKENSTEIN, 1939, dir. Rowland W. Lee
- THE GHOST OF FRANKENSTEIN, 1942, dir. Erle C. Kenton

- FRANKENSTEIN MEETS THE WOLF MAN, 1943, dir. Roy William Neill
- HOUSE OF FRANKENSTEIN, 1944, dir. Erle C. Kenton
- HOUSE OF FRACULA, 1945, dir. Erle C. Kenton
- ABBOT AND COSTELLO MEET FRANKENSTEIN, 1948, dir. Charles D. Barton
- THE CURSE OF FRANKENSTEIN, 1957, dir. Terence Fisher
- I WAS A TEENAGE FRANKENSTEIN, 1957, dir. Herbert L. Strock
- FRANKENSTEIN '70, 1958, dir. Howard W. Koch
- THE EVIL OF FRANKENSTEIN, 1964, dir. Freddie Francis
- FURANKENSHUTAIN TAI BARAGON, 1965, dir. Inoshiro Honda
- FRANKENSTEIN MEETS THE SPACE MONSTER, 1965, dir. Robert Gaffney
- FURANKENSHUTAIN NO KAIJA, 1966, dir. Inoshiro Honda
- JESSE JAMES MEET'S FRANKENSTEIN'S DAUGHTER, 1966, dir. William Beaudine
- FRANKENSTEIN CREATED WOMAN, 1967, dir. Terence Fisher
- FRANKENSTEIN MUS BE DESTROYED, 1969, dir. Terence Fisher
- THE HORROR OF FRANKENSTEIN, 1970 dir. Jimmy Sangster
- DRACULA VERSUS FRANKENSTEIN, 1971, dir. Al Adamson
- DRACULA, PRISONER OF FRANKENSTEIN, 1972, dir. Jesús Franco
- ANDY WARHOL'S FRANKENSTEIN, 1973, dir. Paul Morrissey, Antonio Margheriti
- BLACKENSTEIN, 1973, dir. William A. Levey
- FRANKENSTEIN AND THE MONSTER FROM HELL, 1973, dir. Terence Fisher
- FRANKENSTEIN'S CASTLE OF FREAKS, 1973, dir. Robert H. Oliver
- FRANKENSTEIN: THE TRUE STORY, 1973, dir. Jack Smight
- YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN, 1974, dir. Mel Brooks
- VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN, 1975, dir. Calvin Floyd
- FRANKENSTEIN'S ISLAND, 1982, dir. Jerry Warren
- THE BRIDE, 1985, dir. Franc Roddam
- GOTHIC, 1986, dir. Ken Russel
- DOCTOR HACKENSTEIN, 1989, dir. Richard Clark
- FRANKENHOOKER, 1990, dir. Frank Henenlotter
- FRANKENSTEIN UNBOUND, 1990, dir. Roger Corman
- FRANKENSTEIN: THE COLLEGE YEARS, 1991, dir. Tom Shadyac
- FRANKENSTEIN: THE REAL STORY, 1992, dir. David Wickes
- MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN, 1994, dir. Kenneth Branagh