Romanticism and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

A PowerPoint Presentation based on Work by
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Edited by Dr. Kay Picart and Michaela Densmore © 2001
Romanticism

Flow of the Lecture:

• Frankenstein by Mary Shelley
• “Visualizing the Monstrous in Frankenstein Films” (Picart, 2000)
• Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, (Branagh’s 1994 film)
• Bride of Frankenstein (Whale’s 1935 film)
Various Selected Themes

• Comparison of Mary Shelley’s book to the film, *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*
• James Whale’s *Bride of Frankenstein* - comparisons to the first movie and his life
• Mary Shelley’s life and how it influenced the novel
• How Romanticism influences subsequent interpretations of the novel
Our Questions

• With regard to the framework of Romanticism and its influences on Mary Shelley, how is the Frankenstein myth developed in Mary Shelley’s novel? In other words, can we draw parallels between Shelley’s life (and her situation) and any of the characters in the novel?
Our Questions (2)

- How do the cinematic versions alter or enhance the Frankenstein myth as presented in Mary Shelley’s narrative?
- How do the Frankensteinian cinematic narratives hyperbolize the potency of the parthenogenetic birth while repressing its feminine counterparts thus generating the feminized monstrous and monstrous feminine shadows (Kay Picart)?
Discussion Fundamentals

• Overview of Romanticism to establish a framework for understanding the book and films
  – Art
  – Music
  – Poets

http://www.uh.edu/engines/romantic/main/html

Continued . . .
Discussion Fundamentals (2)

- Brief biography of Mary Shelley to explain how events in her life influenced the book.

- Summary of the differences in the book and cinematic version, *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*

- Discussion of the *Bride of Frankenstein* in relation to James Whale
Romanticism

“A movement in art and literature in the 18th and 19th centuries in revolt against the Neoclassicism of the previous centuries.”

Morner and Rausch (1997)

An example of a Neo-Classic Painting by David
Romanticism (2)

- **Romanticism**, while it cannot be characterized by simple categories, has several things in common:
  - Paintings are often highly imaginative and subjective in their approach
  - A new found emotional intensity creates a dreamlike or visionary feeling
  - In comparison, Neo-Classicism is restrained, calm and straight.
  - Romantic art attempts to express an exuberance of emotions and often defines them mystically.
  - The same statements also hold true for literature during this period.

Continued . . .
“Romanticism” comes from the 18th century and means “romance-like.”

This refers back to the romantic characters of the Middle Ages.

As you look at the following images and read Shelley, keep the characterizations of Romanticism in mind.
Romanticism in Visual Arts

• John Constable (1776-1837)

“No two days are alike, nor even two hours; neither were there ever two leaves of a tree alike since the creation of the world”
Romanticism in Visual Arts

- William Blake

- Whirlwind of Lovers
  (Illustration to Dante’s Inferno, the Circle of the Lustful)
Romanticism in Music

- Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
  - Austrian Composer
  - Student of Haydn
  - Deaf through most of his career
  - Completed nine symphonies
Romanticism in Music

- Frederic Chopin (1810-1849)
- Virtuoso Pianist
- Composed various piano concertos
- Developed a number of new forms of piano music
Romanticism in Poetry

• John Keats (1795-1821)

Major Works:
• *Endymion*: A Poetic Romance (1818)
• *Hyperion* (1820)
• *The Eve of St. Agnes* (1820)
• *Ode to a Nightingale* (1820)
Romanticism in Poetry

• Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

Major Works:
• *Prometheus Unbound* (1820)
• *The Triumph of Life* (1824)
• *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* (1817)

Continued . . .
Romanticism in Poetry

- Samuel Tayler Coleridge (1772-1834)

Major Works:
- *Lyrical Ballads* (1798, 1800)
- *Kubla Khan* (1798)
- *Dejection: An Ode* (1802)
Mary Shelley

- Born August 30, 1797
- Mother dies Sept. 9, 1797
- 1814 Begins a relationship with Percy Shelley. They elope to the continent.
- 1815 First child is born prematurely and dies.
Mary Shelley (2)

- 1816-19 William and Clara are born and die.
- 1819 Percy Shelley is born.
- 1822 Percy lost at sea.
- 1851 Mary dies at 48.
Meet The Parents . . .

William Godwin and Mary Wollenstonecraft/Wollestoncraft

Continued . . .
Frankenstein

“The Romantic idealism of Shelley and his overreaching heroes, was like all idealisms, based on a faith in man’s or more correctly ‘men’s’ ‘divine’ or creative powers. It is Mary Shelley’s critique of where such powers can lead when put in a realizing scientific context and then driven along by “lofty” ambition and high destiny that we see in Frankenstein.” (xix)
The Author

The Mother of Frankenstein

- A member of the British artistic and intellectual elite
- Married Percy Bysshe Shelley
- Had four children (only one survived)
Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein

- The first and most well known work of Mary Shelley
- Written in the summer of 1816 and published in 1818.
- One of the most important characters created in English Literature
Frankenstein - The Characters

- Victor Frankenstein
- The Monster
- Henry Clerval
- Elizabeth Lavenza
- Alphonse Frankenstein
- Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein
- William Frankenstein
- Justine Moritz
- De Lacey Family
- Robert Walton
- Margaret Saville

Continued . . .
Frankenstein - Novel Themes

- The use of knowledge for good or evil
- The invasion of technology into modern life
- Treatment of the poor or uneducated
- The power of nature in the face of unnatural events
Frankenstein - Fundamental Plots

*Frankenstein* has three intersecting narrative frames:

1. The Robert Walton plot line that opens and closes the novel
2. Victor Frankenstein’s narrative
3. The Monster’s story
The Modern Prometheus

Prometheus Bound
Peter Paul Rubens

National Library of Medicine (NLH)
“... and now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper.”

Mary Shelley

Picart

NLM
Question

• With regard to the framework of Romanticism and its influences on Mary Shelley, how is the Frankenstein myth developed in Mary Shelley’s novel?

• Consider the main character and Shelley’s life in your answer.
Answer 1:

- The Frankenstein (or Prometheus) myth is developed in the novel through Victor Frankenstein, the ‘modern Prometheus,’ who seeks to attain the knowledge of the Gods, to enter the sphere of the creator rather than the created. Like Mary Shelley, he attempts the ultimate creative / defiant act; he transgresses by colonizing the female arena of childbirth.

Answer 2:

- In writing *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley put much of her own unhappy life into the story.
- It is said that in losing her mother, her children and her husband, she felt as unloved and alienated as the Monster.
- She identified with the Monster’s wish for acceptance and happiness.
Branagh’s Film

- The latest filmed version of *Frankenstein*, released in 1994
- A film directed by Kenneth Branagh
- Intended to stick as closely as possible to the literary source.
Branagh’s Film - Character Alterations

• Henry Clerval
• Victor Frankenstein
• William Frankenstein
• Victor’s parents

Continued . . .
Branagh’s Film - Film Themes

• Attempts to follow the novel as closely as possible.
• The film adds and removes some novel elements in an attempt to strengthen the novel’s themes
• E.g. Mother’s death in childbirth was added; the creation of a female monster was deleted & replaced by the creation of Elizabeth-Justine as female monster.
Branagh’s Film - Plot Changes

- Professor Waldmann
- Victor’s Family
- Elizabeth
- Clerval
- The Monster
- Family in the Forest
- Overall, the framed nature of plot structure is maintained in this cinematic version of the novel

Continued . . .
Branagh’s Film -The Wedding Night

“The camera constantly draws attention to itself by reflecting the diegetic pace and mood . . . it circles the lovers, visually caressing their intimate gestures, voyeuristically partaking in the beauty of their bodies touching” (122)

Picart, Smoot, & Blodgett, Frankenstein Film Sourcebook (2001).
Branagh’s Film - The Wedding Night (2)

“I will be with you on your wedding night.”

The Monster

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

Painting: Henri Fuseli’s Nightmare
The Bride of Frankenstein

- James Whale, 1935
- Emphasized humor and fantasy over macabre realism.
- The Monster is comically human; cries, laughs, smokes cigars.
James Whale

- *Frankenstein* 1931
- *The Old Dark House* 1932
- *The Invisible Man* 1933
- *Bride of Frankenstein* 1935
- “Whale directed four of the most intelligent, witty and striking horror films ever made” (Jensen, 1).

Continued . . .
“Whale insisted that Elsa Lancaster play both Mary Shelley and the bride, thereby linking the two females. He stressed Mary’s daintiness and poise to imply that within the pretty and delicate woman existed ‘a nasty spirit, a real evil,’ that the two were the same person” (Jensen, 43).
The Bride of Frankenstein - Henry

• The Bride rejects the Monster, who then arranges for both of them, together with Preorius, to die.
• Elizabeth and Henry escape unharmed.
Question

• How do the cinematic versions alter or enhance the Frankenstein myth as presented in Mary Shelley’s narrative?
Answer 1:

- *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* (1994) alters the novel by removing plot elements (e.g. removal of the Monster’s narrative to facilitate chronological development) and enhances it by preserving the central themes through presentation in a powerful auditory and visual combination. (e.g. birth of the monster; the rebirth of Elizabeth-Justine).
Answer 1 (2):

- The changes are made to make up for difficulties in presenting the written material in visual form and to compress the novel into a commercially viable length of film.
- The narrative of the monster was omitted to allow for an easier flow of the visual narrative, but it diminishes the narratological possibilities of a story-in-a-story-in-a-story that the novel enables.
Answer 2:

- *Bride of Frankenstein* alters the original narrative by creating a monster who seems to have feelings; he can talk, smoke and drink alcohol.
- The fact that the male creature wanted a mate was similar to the text.
- In *Bride*, however, Henry and Pretorius do create a female monster as his mate, but she immediately rejects the Monster. In the text, Victor was afraid to create her for fear a race of monsters would arise.
“What this article aims to illustrate is that these parameters are intrinsically tied up with anxieties about gender and technology that achieve mythic form through filmic (re)framing, generating the three “shadows.”” (Picart, 18)
Visualizing the Monstrous in Frankenstein Films (Picart)

“It is one of the main thrusts of this article to show, embedded in Mary Shelley’s story is a critique of Romanticism, which is subverted by its filmic counterparts (Picart, 18).
1. First Shadow  “Feminized” or “inferior” shadow
2. Second Shadow  “Monstrous” or “overdeveloped” shadow
3. Third Shadow  Complex conjunction of the first two shadows

Continued...
Two faces

- The Medusa-like visage of the female monster
- The siren form of the feminine-as-monstrous
Third Shadow in *The Bride of Frankenstein*

The Third Shadow Subtype

“Oxymoronically combines in her very body the potential for life and death, beauty and grotesque, the promise of biological immortality and the threat of untamed female sexuality.”

(Picart, 20-21)
Third Shadow in *The Bride of Frankenstein*

The Third Shadow Subtype

“Another type of subtype is the vision of the feminine-as-monstrous. This may take the form of the unabashedly sexual, or the overly aggressive female. Minnie, the aging crone in *Bride of Frankenstein*, who often cuts the ridiculous figure of meddling gossip [is an example of another monstrously feminine figure—the crone rather than the femme fatale].” (Picart, 21)
Matriarchal

The Dionysian myths intersect with myths surrounding Baubo through the narrative of Persephone’s rape by Hades (Picart, 23).
Self-Birthing / Parthenogenesis

- Patriarchal
- Myth of male self birthing
- Birth of Dionysus
- Appropriation of female birthing
- The father births a son who is his alter-ego

(Picart, 17-18)
Mary Shelley’s Novel and Parthenogenesis

• Elizabeth combines the aspects of nurturing mother and passionate, erotic equal.
• Her femininity remains carefully circumscribed.
• Her choices are conventional.
• Question: How do the dancing sequences reinforce these characterizations of Elizabeth?
Mary Shelley’s Novel and Parthenogenesis

- The Justine-Victor-Elizabeth love triangle changes to Justine-Elizabeth-Victor-the Monster.
- In suicide by self-burning, she refuses to partake in Victor’s deca-dent Prometheanism.
- (Picart)
Question

• How do the Frankensteinian filmic narratives hyperbolize, exaggerate or radicalize the potency of the parthogenetic birth? Give examples of how females in the films become either female monsters or the feminine-as-monsters. Consider the following two movies:
  – Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein
  – Bride of Frankenstein
Some Answers

• The *Bride* is created to make the monster more human (female monster).
• Minnie in the *Bride* is a ridiculous old crone and meddling gossip (feminine-as-monstrous).
• The Bride, caught in between Henry and Pretorius, is caught in a dance-like set of gestures that underline how the men attempt to control her.
• Victor dancing with Elizabeth-Justine (femi-nine-as-monstrous)
Conclusion

• Cover of *New Yorker* in 1997 - the Frankenstein myth remains as current today as ever.