Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus is an 1818 novel written by Mary Shelley at the age of 19. It is a novel infused with some elements of the Gothic novel and the Romantic movement. It was also a warning against the "over-reaching" of modern man and the Industrial Revolution, alluded to in the novel's subtitle, The Modern Prometheus. The story has had an influence across literature and popular culture and spawned a complete genre of horror stories and films. Many distinguished authors consider this the very first science fiction novel, although one might argue that the classical story of Prometheus himself deserves that honor, since the use of fire was an early technology.

Plot:
The novel opens with Captain Walton on his ship sailing north of the Arctic Circle. Walton's ship becomes ice-bound and he spots a figure traveling across the ice on a dog sled. This is Victor Frankenstein's creature. Soon after, he sees the ill Victor Frankenstein himself, and invites him onto his ship. Walton’s telling of Victor’s tale is a Frame Narrative, or story within a story.

Curious and intelligent from a young age, Victor learns from the works of the masters of Medieval alchemy, reading such authors as Albertus Magnus, Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus and shunning modern Enlightenment teachings of natural science. He leaves his beloved family in Geneva, Switzerland to study in Ingolstadt, Bavaria, Germany, where he is first introduced to modern science. In a moment of inspiration, combining his new-found knowledge of natural science with the alchemic ideas of his old masters, Victor perceives the means by which inanimate matter can be imbued with life. He sets about constructing a man—perhaps intended as a companion—using means that Shelley refers to only vaguely. In the novel it is stated (chapter 4, volume 1) that he uses bones from charnel houses (repositories for the bones of the dead), and:

"The dissecting room and the slaughterhouse furnished many of my materials; and often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation, whilst, still urged on by an eagerness which perpetually increased, I brought my work near to a conclusion."

Victor intended the creature to be beautiful, but when it awakens he is disgusted. As Victor used corpses as material for his creation, it has yellow, watery eyes, translucent skin, black pupils, hair and lips and is around 8 feet in height. Victor finds his creation revolting and runs from it in terror. That night he awakens with the creature at his bedside facing him with an outstretched arm. Victor flees again, whereupon the creature disappears. Shock and overwork cause Victor to take ill for several months. After recovering, in about a year's time (with the help of his best friend Clerval who is omitted from the 1931 film), he receives a letter from home informing him of the murder of his youngest brother. He departs for Switzerland at once.

Near Geneva, Victor catches a glimpse of the creature in a thunderstorm among the rocky boulders of the mountains, and is convinced that it killed his brother. Upon arriving home he finds Justine, the family's beloved maid, framed for the murder. To Victor's surprise, Justine makes a false confession because her minister threatens her with excommunication. Despite Victor's feelings of overwhelming guilt, he does not tell anyone about his horrid creation and Justine is convicted and executed. To recover from the ordeal, Victor goes hiking into the mountains where he encounters his "cursed creation" again, this time on the Mer de Glace, a glacier above Chamonix.

The creature converses with Victor and tells him his story, speaking in strikingly eloquent and detailed language. He describes his feelings first of confusion, then rejection and hate. He explains how he learned to talk by studying a poor peasant family through a hole in a wall. He performs in secret many kind deeds for this family, but in the end, they drive him away when they see his appearance. He gets the same response from any human who sees him. The creature confesses that it was indeed he who killed William and framed Justine, and that he did so out of revenge. But now, the creature only wants companionship. He begs Victor to create a woman counterpart with whom the creature can live, sequestered from all humanity but happy with his mate.

At first, Victor agrees, but later, he tears up the half-made companion in disgust and madness worrying that the Creature might create children. In retribution, the creature kills Clerval, Victor's best friend, and later, on Victor's wedding night, strangles his wife Elizabeth. Victor's father later dies of grief. Victor now becomes the hunter: he pursues the creature into the Arctic ice, though in vain. Near exhaustion, he is stranded when an iceberg breaks away, carrying him out into the ocean. Before death takes him, Captain Walton's ship arrives in time to hear his terrible tale.
Walton assumes the narration again, describing a temporary recovery in Victor's health, allowing him to relate his extraordinary story. However, Victor's health soon fails, and he dies. Unable to convince his shipmates to continue north and bereft of the charismatic Frankenstein, Walton is forced to turn back towards England under the threat of mutiny. Finally, the creature boards the ship and finds Victor dead, and, speaking directly to Walton, greatly laments what he has done to his maker. He vows to commit suicide. He leaves the ship by leaping through the cabin window onto the ice, and is never seen again.

**Name Origins:**

**The Creature or Frankenstein's monster**

Part of Frankenstein's rejection of his creation is the fact that he doesn't give it a name, which gives it a lack of identity. Instead it is referred to by words such as 'monster', 'creature', 'daemon', 'fiend', and 'wretch'. When Frankenstein converses with the monster in chapter 10, he addresses it as 'Devil', 'Vile insect', 'Abhorred monster', 'fiend', 'wretched devil' and 'abhorred devil'. During her telling of *Frankenstein*, Shelley referred to the creature as "Adam". It is likely that Shelly is referring to the first man in the Garden of Eden here, as her epigraph:

'Did I request thee, Maker from my clay
To mould Me man? Did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?'

- (X.743-5), John Milton's Paradise Lost.

The monster has often been mistakenly called "Frankenstein". In 1908 one author said "It is strange to note how well-nigh universally the term "Frankenstein" is misused, even by intelligent persons, as describing some hideous monster...". Edith Wharton's *The Reef* (1916) describes an unruly child as an "infant Frankenstein." David Lindsay's "The Bridal Ornament," published in *The Rover*, June 12, 1844, said "...from their Promethean fingers, which beat the maker of poor Frankenstein all to nothing...". After the release of James Whale's popular 1931 film *Frankenstein*, the public at large began speaking of the monster itself as "Frankenstein". A reference to this occurs in *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and in several subsequent films in the series, as well as in film titles such as *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. Some justify referring to the Creature as "Frankenstein" by pointing out that the Creature is, so to speak, Victor Frankenstein's offspring. Another interpretation is that it is Frankenstein himself who is the monster, because of his savage rejection of the being he created. Although Victor has very few pangs of conscience regarding his duty towards the creature he brought to life, it is his undeserved neglect that causes the creature to turn to evil. In a moral, if not actual sense, it is indeed Victor who is the monster.

**Victor Frankenstein**

A possible interpretation of the name Victor derives from the poem *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, a great influence on Shelley (a quotation from *Paradise Lost* is on the opening page of *Frankenstein* and Shelley even allows the monster himself to read it). Milton frequently refers to God as "the Victor" in *Paradise Lost*, and Shelley sees Victor as playing God by creating life. In addition to this, Shelley's portrayal of the monster owes much to the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost*; indeed, the monster says, after reading the epic poem, that he sympathizes with Satan's role in the story.

"Modern Prometheus"

*The Modern Prometheus* is the novel's subtitle. Prometheus, in some versions of Greek mythology, was the Titan who created mankind, and Victor's work by creating man by new means obviously reflects that creative work. Prometheus was also the bringer of fire who took fire from heaven and gave it to man. Zeus eternally punished Prometheus by fixing him to a rock where each day a predatory bird came to devour his liver, only for the liver to return again on the next day; ready for the bird to come again. Prometheus' relation to the novel can be interpreted in a number of ways. For Mary Shelley on a personal level, Prometheus was not a hero but a devil, whom she blamed for bringing fire to man and thereby seducing the human race to the vice of eating meat (fire brought cooking which brought hunting and killing) For Romance era artists in general, Prometheus' gift to man compared with the two great utopian promises of the 18th century: the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution, containing both great promise and potentially unknown horrors.
Byron was particularly attached to the play *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, and Percy Shelley would soon write *Prometheus Unbound*. The term "Modern Prometheus" was actually coined by Immanuel Kant, referring to Benjamin Franklin and his then recent experiments with electricity.

### Analysis

*Frankenstein* is in some ways allegorical. The novel was conceived and written during an early phase of the Industrial Revolution, at a time of dramatic advances in science and technology. That the creation rebels against its creator can be seen as a warning that the application of science can lead to unintended consequences. Another interpretation was alluded to by Shelley herself, in her account of the radical politics of William Godwin, her father:

> “The giant now awoke. The mind, never torpid, but never roused to its full energies, received the spark which lit it into an unextinguishable flame. Who can now tell the feelings of liberal men on the first outbreak of the French Revolution. In but too short a time afterwards it became tarnished by the vices of Orléans -- dimmed by the want of talent of the Girondists -- deformed and blood-stained by the Jacobins.”

A common critique views the story as a journey of pregnancy. The novel taps into the widespread fears of stillborn births and maternal deaths due to complications in delivery - Shelley had suffered a stillborn birth in the prior year, and her mother had died due to complications from her birth. *Frankenstein* -- the Monster's parent, in a sense -- is fearful of the release of the Monster from his control, when it is free to act independently in the world and affect it for better or worse. Also, during much of the novel Victor fears the creature's desire to destroy him by killing everyone and everything most dear to him. However, it must be noted that the creature was not born evil, but only wanted to be loved by its creator, by other humans, and to love a sentient creature like itself. It was mankind who taught it evil: Victor rejected it, and the creature's poor treatment by villagers taught it how to be evil. In this reading, the creature represents the natural fears of bringing a new innocent life into the world and raising it properly so that it does not become a monster.

The book can be seen as a criticism of scientists who are unconcerned by the potential consequences of their work. Victor was heedless of those dangers, and irresponsible with his invention. Instead of immediately destroying the evil he had created, he was overcome by fear and fell psychologically ill. During Justine's trial for murder, he had the chance to come forth and protest to the fact that a violent man had recently declared a vendetta against him and his loved ones, thus saving the young girl. Instead, Frankenstein indulges in his own self-centered grief. The day before Justine is executed and thus resigns herself to her fate and departure from the "sad and bitter world", his sentiments are as such:

> “The poor victim, who was on the morrow to pass the awful boundary between life and death, felt not, as I did, such deep and bitter agony...The tortures of the accused did not equal mine; she was sustained by innocence, but the fangs of remorse tore my bosom and would not forego their hold.”

The book also considers the ethics of creating life and contains innumerable biblical allusions in this context.

In the 1931 film "Frankenstein," Boris Karloff plays the part of the Creature, and the scientist, played by Colin Clive, is renamed Henry Frankenstein. Shelley's character Henry Clerval does not appear in the film at all, which eliminates Victor's foil altogether. However, there is a character called Victor who is after Elizabeth, Frankenstein's fiancée. Changing the doctor's name from Victor also eliminates some original irony, inasmuch as the novel ends after exposing the doctor's utter failure and destruction. Since this film, the horror culture has confused modern audiences into placing the scientist's name to his freakish creation. This event has stimulated much conversation in the literary criticism of Shelley's work. Attributing the name of the scientist to his creation reveals a deeper connection between the two, especially when the scientist realizes the great danger that the creation presents to himself and to the world.
Mary Shelley's Sources
Mary incorporated a number of different sources into her work, not the least of which was the Promethean myth from Ovid. The influence of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, being the books the creature finds in the cabin, are also clearly evident within the novel. Also, both Shelleys had read William Beckford's *Vathek* (a Gothic novel that has been likened to an Arabesque). *Frankenstein* also contains multiple references to her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, and her major work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* which discusses the lack of equal education for males and females. The inclusion of her mother’s ideas in her work is also related to the theme of creation/motherhood in the novel. Mary is likely to have acquired some ideas for Frankenstein’s character from Humphry Davy’s book *Elements of Chemical Philosophy* in which he had written: "science has… bestowed upon man powers which may be called creative; which have enabled him to change and modify the beings around him...".

Frankenstein in Popular Culture
Shelley’s *Frankenstein* has been called the first novel of the now-popular mad scientist genre. However, popular culture has changed the naive, well-meaning Victor Frankenstein into more and more corrupt character. It has also changed the creature into a more sensational, dehumanized being than was originally portrayed. In reality, the worst thing that Victor does is neglect the creature out of fear. He does not intend to create a horror. The creature even, begins as an innocent, loving being. Not until the world inflicts violence on him does he develop his hatred. Scientific knowledge is highlighted at the end by Victor as potentially evil and dangerously alluring.

Soon after the book was published, however, stage managers began to see the difficulty of bringing the story into a more visual form. In performances beginning in 1823, playwrights began to recognize that to visualize the play, the internal reasonings of the scientist and the creature would have to be cut. The creature became the star of the show, with his more visual and sensational violence. Victor was portrayed as a fool for delving into nature’s mysteries. Despite the changes, though, the play was much closer to the original than later films would be.

Silent films continued the struggle to bring the story alive. Early versions such as the Edison Company's *Frankenstein*, managed to stick somewhat close to the plot. In 1931, however, James Whale created a film the drastically changed the story. Working under Universal Studios, Whale introduced to the plot several elements now familiar to a modern audience: the image of "Dr." Frankenstein, whereas earlier he was merely a naive, young student, an Igor-like character (called Fritz in this film) who makes the mistake of bringing his master a criminal's brain while gathering body parts, and a sensational creation scene focusing on electric power rather than chemical processes. In this film, the scientist is an arrogant, intelligent, grown man, rather than a unknowing youngster. Another scientist destroys the creature for him, the film never forcing him to take responsibility for his acts. Whale's sequels, *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), *The Son of Frankenstein* (1939), and *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942) all continued the general theme of sensationalism, horror, and exaggeration, with the newly-dubbed Dr. Frankenstein and his parallels growing more and more sinister.

Later films diverted even more from the story, portraying the doctor as a sexual pervert and using his new persona to ask contemporary questions about science. Andy Warhol's *Frankenstein* he is portrayed as a necrophiliac, and in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* he creates a creature in order to copulate with it. In *Frankenstein Created Woman*, he transplants a man's soul into a woman's body, joining the transsexual debate. And in *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* he transplants a fellow-scientist's brain into another body in order to keep him alive, introducing moral questions into how far science should go to save a life.

Although these films managed to bring the audience's attention back to the scientist, rather than the monster, they continue to show him as more depraved than the original. All in all, the story of *Frankenstein* that most people know today is more the product of movie studios than of Mary Shelley. Still, these films have provided valuable insights into the nature of film, the evolution of the general populace's view of science, and several interesting interpretations of a classic story.