

# Frankenstein, the Aesthetic Failure

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*"I perceived in the gloom a figure which stole from behind a clump of trees near me; I stood fixed, gazing intently: I could not be mistaken. A flash of lightning illuminated the object, and discovered its shape plainly to me; its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity, instantly informed me that it was the wretch, the filthy daemon, to whom I had given life."*

—Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Since its first anonymous publication in 1818, Frankenstein's tale, written by a 19 years' old young woman (Fig. 1A), has not cease to fascinate humanity. Two hundred years later, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is now considered as a literary classic and was classified in 2019 by the BBC as one of the 100 most influential novels. It has inspired numerous literary essays, novels, theater plays, movies, TV shows, drawings, paintings, sculptures, and hundreds of articles. The name of Frankenstein, often used to describe a monster, has become a common word, symbolizing a personage of horror. The book of Mary Shelley has been analyzed and dissected in minute details by philologists, historians, philosophers, psychoanalysts, and science fiction experts, in the light of the major questions of the time: French Revolution, abolition of slavery, plague epidemics. Most often today, it resonates as a warning for the dangers that might result from the new technologies like human cloning or the creation of robots. But it may also transmit a message to plastic and reconstructive surgeons.

## GENEVA 1816, WHERE IT ALL STARTED

"I am by birth a Genevese, and my family is one of the most distinguished of that republic."

This statement opens the narrative of doctor Victor Frankenstein, when he was rescued on board the ship of Robert Walton locked in the ice near the North Pole.

In the spring of 1816, Lord Byron and his lover John Polidori, fleeing scandal, left England for Geneva, and it was there that they were joined by the poet Percy Shelley, Mary Godwin, and Claire Clairmont, Mary's stepsister (Fig. 2). All of them are followers of free love; moralizers call them the "League of Incest." By summer, Clairmont was pregnant by Byron, who had left his daughter Ada and his pregnant wife in England. The 18' years old Mary Godwin, daughter of the radical thinker and feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft (who died of septicemia a week after giving birth to Mary), and the famous liberal philosopher William Godwin, had already lost a child at the age of fifteen and was pregnant from Shelley, which she married a year later.

In Geneva, the couples rent a splendid villa dominating the lake, just outside the city (Fig. 3A). The climate was cold and rainy, and the explosion of the Indonesian volcano Tambora had created "a year without a summer." Reading, drinking, and sex do not satisfy

enough their romantic inspirations. They visit all the suburbs of Geneva, they climb to Chamonix to see the Mont Blanc and the Sea of Ice, they sail on Lake Geneva, experiencing dreadful storms.

But Byron was bored. One evening, he announces, "We will each write a ghost story."

"The noble author began a tale, a fragment of which he printed at the end of his poem of Mazeppa. Shelley commenced one founded on the experiences of his early life. Poor Polidori had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady, who was so punished for peeping through a key-hole. . . ." It was later published as *The Vampyre*. Mary is looking for inspiration. It comes as a night dream. Encouraged by Shelley, the few initial pages become a book in 3 volumes. She is still nursing her second baby when she starts writing her story and pregnant with her third by the time she finishes in May 1817. She did not put her name on the book, and published *Frankenstein* anonymously in 1818, not least out of a fear that she might lose custody of her children. The first theatrical production of "Frankenstein," was staged in London in 1823. The story of this monster creates an immediate sensation, but it is also criticized for its Godwinian radicalism and its Byronic impieties. Some have called it "a tissue of horrible and disgusting absurdity, radical unhinged, and immoral". The first popular edition is published in 1831, heavily revised and shortened to make it less scandalous, with a new preface, where Mary writes: "How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea." It was the dream of a night and writing consisted of "making only a transcript."

## THE STORY

Born in a wealthy Genevan family, the young Victor Frankenstein is encouraged by his father to seek a greater understanding of the world through chemistry. Since childhood, he is obsessed with studying outdated theories simulating natural wonders. Sent by his father to the University of the German city of Ingolstadt, he excels at chemistry and other sciences, soon developing a secret technique to impart life to non-living matter. Collecting various pieces of cadavers and using a combination of methods described by ancient and modern experts in natural sciences, he undertakes the creation of a humanoid and is able to put him to life. Despite Victor's selecting its features as "beautiful," upon animation the Creature is instead "a hideous giant, with watery white eyes and yellow skin that barely conceals the muscles and blood vessels underneath" (Fig. 1B).

Soon, the Creature disappears, to the despair of Victor, who returns to Geneva, where he learns that his younger brother has been killed in a strange manner. A young girl is accused of the crime, but Victor suspects his wretch creature to be its author. Ravaged by grief and guilt, Victor retreats into the mountains close to Mont Blanc. The Creature finds him there and pleads for Victor to hear his tale: He (It) relates his first days of life, being alone in the wilderness and finding that people were afraid of and hated him

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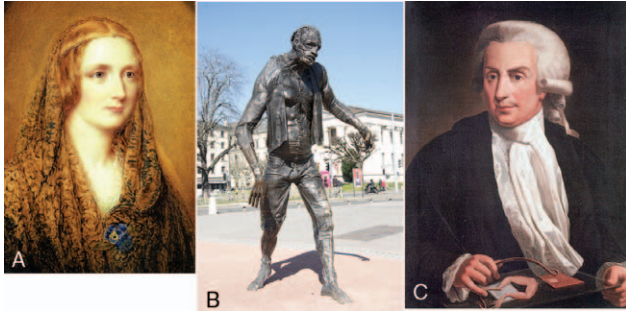
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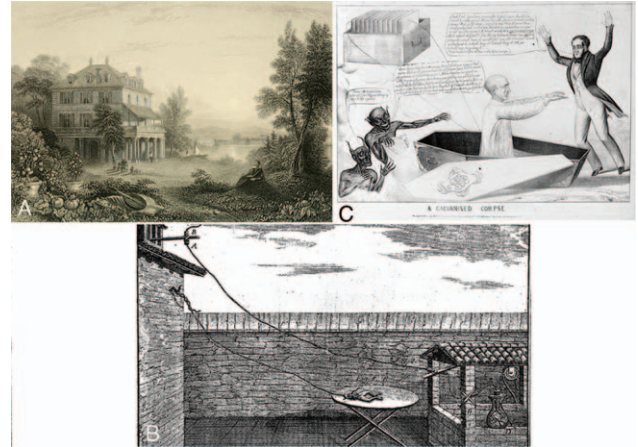
**FIGURE 1.** (A) Mary Godwin-Shelley. (B) Statue of the Monster, where he committed his crimes in the city of Geneva. (C) Luigi Galvani with a frog preparation.

because of his appearance. Secretly living close to a poor family for months, he learned to speak by listening to them and taught himself to read after discovering a lost satchel of books in the woods. When he saw his reflection in a pool, he realized that his physical appearance is hideous, and it terrifies him as it terrifies normal humans. He tries to love and to help the humans, but he is always banished. He understands that he will never be part of the human community and tells Victor his distress, saying that he will retire in the deserts of South America, live like a beast, and never meet or harm anyone anymore, provided Victor would fashion a female mate for him.

Victor Frankenstein accepts and moves to the Orkney’s islands near Scotland, to realize his task, but he suspects that the Creature is following him. He also fears that, creating a male and a female humanoid, might lead to the breeding of a race that could plague mankind, and decides to tear apart the unfinished female creature. As a revanche, the Monster does not hesitate to strangle Victor’s best friend and later, his wife in Geneva, the day after they got married. Victor tries to catch the Criminal and pursues him up to the North Seas, but finally collapses from exhaustion and hypothermia



**FIGURE 2.** (A) Lord Byron, (B) Percy Shelley, (C) John Polidori. (D) Claire Clairmont.



**FIGURE 3.** (A) Villa Diodati, near Geneva. (B) Galvani’s experiment with electricity. (C) Aldini’s reanimation of a cadaver.

before he can find his quarry. He is rescued on board of a British boat caught into the ice, and dies there, not before meeting again his Creature. The Monster vows then to kill himself so that nobody else will ever know of his existence, and drifts away on an ice raft that is soon “lost in darkness and distance,” never to be seen again.

**ALCHEMY**

Compared to the extraordinary education and exposure she had by reading and discussing the books of her parents and companions in matters philosophical, political, racial engagement, literature, and poetry, Mary had little scientific background. However, she recalls in her preface: “During one of the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, various philosophical doctrines were discussed, and among others the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated. They talked of the experiments of Dr. Darwin. . .” Maybe she was also inspired by the local scenery and the reputation of Geneva at that time, as a center of scientists: “It is a subject of additional interest to the author that this story was begun in the majestic region where the scene is principally laid and in society which cannot cease to be regretted. I passed the summer of 1816 in the environs of Geneva.”

When, in the book, Victor Frankenstein enumerates his passion for occult and modern sciences, he quotes several names of past scientists, “Natural philosophy is the genius that has regulated my fate; I desire, therefore, in this narration, to state those facts which led to my predilection for that science.” During his studies in Ingolstadt, Victor quotes several times famous ancient natural scientists like Albertus Magnus, Cornelius Agrippa, and Paracelsus, and confesses: “I read and studied the wild fancies of these writers with delight; they appeared to me treasures known by too few besides myself. I have described myself as always having been imbued with a fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature.” Although a little forgotten today, these 3 personages have plaid a major role in promoting ideas of transforming matter into another and creating elixirs of life. They studied and wrote on theology, philosophy, magic, alchemy, and secret esoteric matters, but at the same time, they can be counted as pioneer experimenters in natural science and initiators of our modern pharmacopeia.

Albertus Magnus (1200–1280) was a German Dominican friar and bishop, known as Doctor universalis and Doctor expertus for his encyclopedic knowledge and writings on topics such as logic, botany, geography, astronomy, astrology, mineralogy, alchemy,

zoology, physiology. He is said to have discovered the philosopher's stone, capable of turning base metals into gold. It is also called the elixir of life, useful for rejuvenation and for achieving immortality. Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1536) was a German polymath, physician, legal scholar, soldier, theologian, and writer. Among his multiple studies, travels, professions, and engagements, he is best known for his writings on occult philosophy and his book *On the Nobility and Excellence of the Feminine Sex*, a work that tried to prove the superiority of women using cabalistic ideas. Surnamed the “Archimagus,” he also spent some time in Geneva as a physician. Paracelsus (1494–1541) was a Swiss physician and alchemist. In his eventful life, Paracelsus was a crude and superstitious empiricist, an alchemist, and astrologer in the public square, a megalomaniac wanderer, peddling pamphlets, Bibles and his portraits in Austria, Germany, Italy, but he was also a physician of great erudition. In 1526, Paracelsus was appointed city doctor in Basel, an important position, as it included a chair of medicine at the University. He was also a brawler and a provocateur and on June 20, 1527, during the feast of St. John, he staged a great autodafé, throwing into the blaze the works of Galen and Avicenna proclaiming: “Go to the fire of St. John and let all that is bad disappear into the air with your smoke!” He enjoined his students to abandon this “dead knowledge” and apply themselves only to the knowledge of nature. He is credited to be one of the fathers of pharmacology and the inventor of laudanum, also called the wine of opium, to alleviate pain. Johann Conrad Dippel (1673–1734) is not quoted in Mary Shelley's book, but it is probable that she heard about him, and may be visited his birthplace. Dippel was born at Castle Frankenstein, near Darmstadt in Germany. He was known as pietist, theologian, physician, alchemist, and occultist. He led an adventurous life, often getting into trouble because of his disputed opinions and his problems with managing money. He was eventually imprisoned for heresy, where he served a 7-year sentence. He created an animal oil known as “Dippel Oil,” which was supposed to be the equivalent to the alchemists' dream of the elixir of life. In his dissertation *Maladies and Remedies of the Life of the Flesh*, he claimed that souls could be transferred from one corpse to another by using a funnel.

## ELECTRICITY

The young Victor narrates: “[Following a storm in Geneva] we found a tree shattered in a singular manner. The catastrophe of this tree excited my extreme astonishment, and I eagerly inquired of my father the nature and origin of thunder and lightning. He replied “Electricity”; describing at the same time the various effects of the power. He constructed a small electrical machine, and exhibited a few experiments”. Mary noted in one preface that during one evening in the middle of summer, the discussions turned to the nature of the principle of life. “Perhaps a corpse would be re-animated”, “*galvanism* has given token of such things”. There is also speculation that one of her models for Victor Frankenstein was Percy Shelley, who at Eton had experimented with electricity and magnetism as well as with gunpowder and numerous chemical reactions, and whose rooms at Oxford were filled with scientific equipment. Among the physiologists at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the experiences of Galvani had an immense influence on the understanding of animal motricity.

Luigi Galvani (1737–1798) was an Italian physician, physicist, biologist and philosopher, lecturer of surgery and anatomy at the Academy of Sciences in Bologna (Fig. 1C). In the mid-1780s, Galvani and his wife connected the nerves of a recently dead frog to a long metal wire and pointed it toward the sky during a thunderstorm. With each flash of lightning, the frog's legs twitched and jumped as if they were alive (Fig. 3B). Through such experiments

Galvani proved not only that recently-dead muscle tissue can respond to external electrical stimuli, but that muscle and nerve cells possess an intrinsic electrical force responsible for muscle contractions and nerve conduction in living organisms. Galvani named this newly discovered force “animal electricity,” and thus laid foundations for the modern fields of electrophysiology and neuroscience. His nephew, Giovanni Aldini (1762–1834), was also a physician, who became professor of physic at the University of Bologna. His scientific work was chiefly concerned with galvanism and its medical applications. Aldini's most famous public demonstration of the electro-stimulation technique of deceased limbs was performed on the executed criminal George Forster, who had just been hanged in London in 1803. The *Newgate Calendar* describes what happened when the galvanic process was used on the body: “On the first application of the process to the face, the jaws of the deceased criminal began to quiver, and the adjoining muscles were horribly contorted, and one eye was actually opened. In the subsequent part of the process the right hand was raised and clenched, and the legs and thighs were set in motion” (Fig. 3C). Mary was only 5 years old at that time, but this extraordinary experiment had certainly haunted her dreams: “By the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.”

## ESTHETIC

Esthetic values were very much attached to the romantic period which culminated with the small group of poets who spent a few months in Geneva, Byron, Polidori, Shelley, and Mary Godwin. The most characteristic romantic commitment is to the idea that art and beauty should shape all aspects of human life. Being fundamental to human existence, beauty and art should be a central ingredient not only in a philosophical or artistic life, but also in the lives of ordinary men and women. The primacy of the esthetic of romanticism should permeate and shape human life. The portraits of the 5 protagonists assembled in the villa Diodati express perfectly this search for beauty in their outfits, their hairstyle, the way they present themselves (Figs. 1 and 2).

So, what happen following the reconstruction of doctor Frankenstein? “Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived.” The creature, shaped from raw materials supplied by “the dissecting room and the slaughter-house,” cannot be named except by words such as “ugly wretch,” “abhorred monster,” “demon,” “devil,” “fiend,” “vile insect.” By his ugliness, the monster breaks the laws of Nature. Although the “Being” constructed by Victor, can think, learn to speak, read and have feelings, its body is a failure, because of its ugliness, “its form, gigantic in stature, yet uncouth and distorted in proportion.” It is a living assembly of organs without respect for the aesthetic of Nature. Its “ghastly and distorted” shape outpaces the limits of human normality. Victor is devastated when he first sees his creature. “Never did I behold a vision so horrible as his face, of such a loathsome yet appealing hideousness.” Mary Shelley took pains that the reader's sympathy would lie not only with Frankenstein, but also with the Creature, whose suffering is dreadful. He is conscient that his appearance arouses horror. Trying to compose with the humans, he chooses initially to meet an old blind man, who receives him without fear, but the drama arises as soon as he is seen by other people, leading to his rejection and banishment. His crimes are the consequences of its inhumanity linked to his appearance. Born innocent, he has been treated so terribly that he has become a villain.

The plastic and reconstructive surgeon Victor Frankenstein is a genius. He makes use of the whole science known at his epoque, he uses all kinds of methods, bone transfers, fancy skin flaps; he was able to animate his creature, to give him an intelligence, but the overall result is an esthetic failure. He probably had no experience in esthetic surgery!

### THE PANDEMIC OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Mary had a taste for the esoteric, the morbid, the gothic fictions like the German phantasmagorias designed to scare people, and, with *Frankenstein*, she really succeeded to scare children and adults for >200 years. But tragic events did not spare Mary Shelley's life. She gave birth to 4 children, buried 3, and lost another unnamed baby to a miscarriage so severe that she nearly died of bleeding. While she was in Geneva, she learns that her half-sister Fanny Imlay had committed suicide with laudanum. In 1822, her husband Percy, who had left her for an affair with Claire Clermont, embarked on the sailboat "Ariel" in the golf of La Spezia, and drowned during a tempest. One year before, John Polidori, weighed down by depression and gambling debts, committed suicide by means of cyanide. Byron, who engaged himself and fought for Greek independence, dies in 1824 of malaria in Missolonghi. As she has put it later "I am the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me."

Is it because of the enormous success of her first book, because of her own biography, because of her extraordinary talent as a visionary writer, or because she liked to frighten humanity, that 10 years after *Frankenstein*, Mary wrote *The Last Man*, a novel of anticipation, that calls us out today very strongly? Situated at the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this long tale crosses the European countries with entrancing stories of love and separation, natural beauty, and chaotic landscapes, life, and death. The kingdom of England has become a republic, the Greeks reconquer Constantinople, but they meet an enemy worse than the Turks. The plague had started to ravage the city and soon, it will spread on the whole of Europe, including Great Britain, killing most of the people. At the end, a small group of survivors, including the story teller, decide to flea and take refuge in the Greek islands. They cross deserted cities and landscapes, Paris, Geneva, Milano, try to embark in a frail skiff to cross Adriatic, but are rejected on the Italian coast by a storm. Lionel Verney, is the only survivor. He moves to the eternal city of Rome, writes his story, and decides to leave the shore with the books of Homer and Shakespeare: "Thus around the shores of deserted earth, while the sun is high, and the moon waxes or wanes, angels, the spirit of the dead, and the ever-open eye of the Supreme, will behold the tiny bark freighted with Verney—THE LAST MAN."



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