



06

MARY SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN* AS THE FIRST SCIENCE FICTION

Dr. Y. S. Handibag

Associate Professor and Head

Department of English

Yogeshwari Mahavidyalaya, Ambajogai,

Maharashtra, India

Abstract:

Science fiction as an important literary genre has been evolved in twentieth century. It has often been argued that Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* is the first real science fiction. *Frankenstein* inaugurates the genre of science fiction, and many critics cite the novel as one of the first examples of the science fiction novel. The protagonist Victor Frankenstein and his experiment to create a sapient creature is itself an indication that *Frankenstein* is a science fiction. The protagonist Victor Frankenstein is a scientist and driven by ambition of scientific curiosity. His quest for absolute knowledge and power has ended in his own destruction. Shelley shows the dangerous aspects of modern scientific world. How the scientific investigation goes beyond human control due to the excess focus on it without proper attention has well been presented in the novel. Victor Frankenstein is a scientist, the events of the story occur as a result of his scientific experimentations, and as such science becomes closely related to nowadays or future scientific experiments. The monster is itself a scientific investigation of the protagonist. Even today, *Frankenstein* is a model for the modern scientists who breach the societal norms and want to test the limits of science. The present paper analyses the events in the novel which clearly indicate that *Frankenstein* is the first real science fiction.

Keywords: Science Fiction, *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelly, Alchemy, Futuristic Ideas, Fantasy, Realism

Frankenstein; or, *The Modern Prometheus* is an 1818 novel written by English author Mary Shelley. *Frankenstein* tells the story of Victor Frankenstein, a young scientist who creates a sapient creature in an unorthodox scientific experiment.

Many critics and writers credited *Frankenstein* as the first real science fiction work. Dziemianowicz Stefan, who is both an author and a critic, first defines science fiction as the fiction in which science plays an important role. These fictions tend to be "based on speculative scientific discoveries or developments." Science fiction emerges as a genre as science and technology increasingly become a part of everyday life. Dziemianowicz reports that the first science fiction novel is seen by many to be *Frankenstein*, released in 1818 as the Industrial Revolution was underway and scientific and technological advancement began to become more salient.

Some claim the novel to be the first legitimate example of the genre we now call science fiction, a genre that is grounded in valid scientific research. It predicts what might be possible in the future given new scientific discoveries; and, offers a humanistic critique of either specific technological inventions or the very nature of scientific thinking.

Though *Frankenstein* is infused with elements of the Gothic novel and the Romantic Movement, Brian Aldiss has argued that it should be considered the first true science fiction story. In contrast to previous stories with fantastical elements resembling those of later science fiction, Aldiss states that the central character 'makes a deliberate decision' and 'turns to modern experiments in the laboratory' to achieve fantastic results.

Frankenstein inaugurates the genre of science fiction, and many critics cite the novel as one of the first examples of the science fiction novel. Science fiction as a genre speculates about possible applications for advances in science and technology. In science fiction novels, the rules governing normal life are transgressed in some way. For example, a popular convention in science fiction is life existing outside of Earth; for Shelley, the idea of humans being able to artificially create new life becomes possible within the space of the novel. In many science fiction novels, the fictional technologies and scientific developments can be read as an implicit criticism of contemporary society. By prompting her readers to think about an extreme example where someone recklessly pursues knowledge, Shelley sheds light on her own era, where a focus on inventing new things and optimizing technology was beginning to threaten established ways of life.

As science fiction, Frankenstein incorporates fictional science to posit truths about the human experience. Shelley's metaphor for the novel, "my hideous progeny," reminds readers to respect the uncertain elements in invention in the arts and sciences.

The protagonist Victor Frankenstein is a scientist and driven by ambition of scientific curiosity. His quest for absolute knowledge and power has ended in his own destruction. So the novel shows that thoughtlessness causes destruction to themselves. Shelley shows the dangerous aspects of modern scientific world. How the scientific investigation goes beyond human control due to the excess focus on it without proper attention has well been presented in the novel.

The novel was written in 1880. At that time society was over hopeful of science. The quest for knowledge was one of the most essential aspects of that time. So does the protagonist too in the novel. Frankenstein's focus is from past to the future. But the success is rewarded as a horrible situation. It is Mary's question to the thoughtless development of modern science.

Frankenstein as the first science fiction novel is considered the starting point to analyse the relationship between science fiction and futuristic ideas. It is a novel where science plays a major role. Victor Frankenstein is a scientist, the events of the story occur as a result of his scientific experimentations, and as such science becomes closely related to nowadays or future scientific experiments. Victor Frankenstein is a scientist who becomes interested in the process of imbuing inanimate bodies with life. He discovers a technique, which allows him to reach his goal, and he creates a creature by assembling various body parts from other dead bodies. After he does this, though, he abandons the creature, which turns against him and kills some of his family members and friends. As a result, the roles switch and Frankenstein hunts the creature all the way to Arctic Circle, near the North Pole. There Frankenstein dies of exhaustion and the creature vows to destroy itself so that no others will ever know of his existence.

The monster is itself a scientific investigation of the protagonist. It is eight feet tall, ugly and attempts to integrate himself into human social patterns but all who see him dislikes him. The feeling of abandonment compels him to seek revenge against his own creator. Also at this point, it becomes clear that Mary Shelley is very critical about the scientific invention and intention of contemporary people in regard to its further coming results.

Frankenstein is introduced as a student with an ardent yearning towards understanding the secrets of nature (Frankenstein, 37). His father is 'not scientific' and therefore, he receives no proper guidance in childhood. He has to struggle, for gathering scientific knowledge with a 'child's blindness' (Frankenstein, 38). He reads Cornelius Agrippa with enthusiasm and his father's comment that "it is a sad trash" only serves to increase his avidity. He eventually buys volumes of *Parcels us* and *Albert Magnus*. Thus, Mary gives us a logical development of Frankenstein's interest from the 15th Century occult philosopher and alchemist, whose volume *Deocculpta philosophia libritres*, was then treated as modern occult study, to the natural philosophers and alchemists like Albertus and Paracelsus, who are linked because of their impressive theory of elixir of life. Albertus is also credited with the discovery of arsenic and silver nitrate.

Victor Frankenstein primarily undertakes, but fails to fulfill his ambitions by studying alchemy. It is with his introduction to modern science that he is able to discover what is called in the novel, the 'astonishing secret'. When the first teacher he meets at the university dismisses alchemy with impatience, Frankenstein remains unconvinced. He is yet unwilling to accept a science that could replace his fantasy with realism. He, however, finds a way of reconciling the promised grandeur of alchemy with reality under the influence of the arguments placed by the second professor. This Professor, M. Waldman says:

The ancient teachers of this science ...promised impossibilities, and performed nothing .The modern masters promise very little; they know that metals cannot be transmuted, and that the elixir of life is a chimera. But these philosophers, whose hands seem only made to dabble in the dirt, and their eyes to pour over the microscope or the crucible, have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and show how she works in her hiding places. They ascend into the heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows (Frankenstein, 47).

Mary Shelley attempts no specific details of Frankenstein's experiments and discoveries. His report of his own credit is also imprecise: "I made some discoveries in the improvement of some chemical instruments which procured me great esteem and admiration in the university" (Frankenstein, 51).

Instead, the novel provides us with the details of the education that Frankenstein's scientific mind is exposed to. First, he becomes acquainted with science of anatomy and observes the 'natural decay and corruption' of the human body. Next, he studies the 'cause and progress' of this decay, and spends his days and nights in the vaults of charnel houses. Next, he observes how the good health of human beings is despoiled and wasted as he ages. He analyzes and examines even the trivial causes 'as exemplified in the change from life to death, and death to life'. This approach of Mary Shelley helps to establish that what Frankenstein creates is by way of experimentation and not by magic:

Not that like a magic scene it all opened upon me at once: the information I had obtained was of a nature rather to direct my endeavours so soon as I should point them towards the object of my search,...I was like the Arabian who had been buried with the dead, and found a passage to life, aided only by a glimmering, and seemingly ineffectual, light (Frankenstein, 53).

Alchemy is hollow because it only has reference to dreams, modern science is effective and can become justly miraculous because it unravels nature so as to ridicule the imperceptible world with its "own shadows". In empirical research and inspection nature is perceived through dispassionate apparatus rather than by the aspiration or imagination. Frankenstein eventually finds out that this new discipline can also be used to engineer a product of human imagination. Though later in the novel his scientific instruments are identified with the creation of the monster himself, Frankenstein's mission is made explicit as selfless and messianic:

A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent nature would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs (Frankenstein, 55).

Again, it is because of his consideration of the human species that Frankenstein refuses to create the mate for his monster, the Eve for the Adam and destroys what he had begun to create under the fervent request of the monster.

Victor Frankenstein's behaviour seems reckless and preposterous despite all his methodical application in the field of science. He receives his creation with scorn and horror solely for the reason of his physical appearance. He thoughtlessly and heartlessly discards him immediately after creating him. It does not occur to him that the new born, the oversized baby, ludicrously grotesque, is thereby left helpless in an environment of hostility where nature itself is feral. Later, in his confession to Captain Walton, Frankenstein, however, reflects on the unpredictable "feelings of human nature",

reports how he, who had selected his features to be beautiful, had laboured hard for almost two years “for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body” (Frankenstein, 59) flees after he discerns his creation.

Frankenstein remains blind to the fact that he has let loose a power in the world, that he himself has assumed to be fearful, and even though the creature may not be aesthetically agreeable, he must remain accountable to his creation. Nevertheless, Frankenstein shrinks away from all responsibility and emphasizes that he is irreproachable of all transgression except for the act of creation itself. Frankenstein, in effect, turns out to be an idealist and naïve young man who nonetheless has faced great and unparalleled adversity. Despite the monster’s fervent appeals Frankenstein’s concerns assumingly remain with the well-being his own species. In contrast to Frankenstein’s ostensible immobility, his helpless creation, frequently called the monster, is active. His love for his creator is unreciprocated and despite all his pleadings, he succeeds in making little favourable impression on Victor Frankenstein.

The novel is representative of the motif of the scientist’s creation, which turns against its maker. This idea has triggered a huge cultural outrage, debating issues of ethics and morality in science, which questions the limits of human knowledge. Even today, Frankenstein is a model for the modern scientists who breach the societal norms and want to test the limits of science. The Frankenstein metaphor is perfectly applicable to the issue of nanotechnology, which is branch in technology that deals with the manipulation of individual atoms and molecules. Science fiction writers like Karle Schroeder’s *Ventus* (2001) exploit fears of this technology turning into a doomsday. In addition, the novel Frankenstein actually has many common elements with new technology, even though they might not be visible at first.

Preservation of anatomical material was of huge interest when Frankenstein was written, as it is now, though for very different reasons. Today, the interest is in preserving organs and tissues suitable for transplant. Some individuals even want to cryogenically freeze their entire body in case future scientists are able to revive them and cure whatever disease caused their original death. In that respect, the aims are not so different from what the fictional Victor Frankenstein was attempting two hundred years ago.

The fascination with human anatomy had reached a peak at the turn of the nineteenth century. In the UK, a number of private anatomy schools opened in the major cities. Anatomy professors and surgeons passed on their knowledge and skills to eager medical students. Anatomy schools, and their collections of anatomical specimens, might have provided inspiration to Shelley. However, the surgical skills they taught would not have been a great help to her character Victor Frankenstein when he was constructing his creature. Surgery at that time was mostly concerned with cutting bits off rather than reattaching them. The idea of transplanting material between individuals was in its infancy but some aspects of plastic surgery were surprisingly advanced.

Mary’s character Victor would have had to transplant all the internal organs as well as skin, something no surgeon at the time would have contemplated. Victor, like his real-life contemporaries, would have had no concept of tissue matching and would not have thought twice about using material from different species, let alone different human individuals.

Nowadays, the power of science is giving the public fears and at the same time hope, especially in the area of cloning and genetic engineering. There is a perception that these new forms of manipulating biological processes threaten the natural boundaries between the human and nature for example, genetic engineering could create unknown side effects or outcomes. Certain changes in plant or animal could cause unpredictable allergic reactions in some people, which, in its original form does not occur. Frankenstein continues to be used as a framework with which to express the public’s anxieties about these issues.

Thus, the whole novel is about scientific ambition of the protagonist. It is said that one of the most important quest of scientific aspect is the quest of a new kind of creation. But most of the scientists are unknown about how their invention will be resulted at last. They are thoughtless about the further coming danger and destructions of science. Victor Frankenstein is one of the representative figures of modern scientists who created monster due to his excess focus in the quest of scientific knowledge but at last he lost the control over his own creation. Rather Victor Frankenstein compelled to lose his own family members and his own creation became the very cause of his own destruction. He was over curious man to learn the hidden law of nature due to his fervent love for science, this event of

the novel is very symbolic for the development of modern science. It allows to have the deep thought in the field of science. In this way as the protagonist and all his activities in the holistic plot structure of the novel moves around the scientific subject matter together with its consequences. So, the novel can be analysed as a science fiction.

References

- Aldiss, Brian. (1973). *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction*. New York: Doubleday and Company. 1973. Print.
- Brown, Marshall Ed. *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. Volume V: Romanticism*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2007. Print.
- Grylls, R. Glynn. *Mary Shelley: A Biography*. London: Oxford University Press. 1938. Print.
- <http://nopr.niscair.res.in/bitstream/123456789/54110/1/JST%207%283-4%29%20191-200.pdf>
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frankenstein>
- <https://www.bachelorandmaster.com/britishandamericanfiction/frankenstein-as-a-science-fiction.html#.YWAx-tpBzcs>
- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342419188_SCIENCE_FICTION_AND_FUTURISM_IN_MARY_SHELLEY'S_FRANKENSTEIN
- <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/frankenstein/genre/>
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*. London: Lockington, Hughes, Harding, Mayor and Jones. 1818. Print.



This is an Open Access e-Journal Published Under A Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

To Cite the Article: Handibag, Y. S., “Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein as the First Science Fiction”. *Literary Cognizance*, II-2 (September, 2021): 26-30. Web.