

**Mary Shelley's Frankenstein**  
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**Gothic Landscape**

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# Week 3: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein


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LECTURE 3D: GOTHIC LANDSCAPE  
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Hello and welcome to this session on Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. In today's lecture, I am going to talk about the Gothic Landscape and how the landscape has symbolic resonances for the values that we think are embedded in the narrative of Frankenstein.

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## Gothic and Crisis

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'It is well known that the idea for the novel emerged at the Villa Diodati, on the shores of Lake Geneva, during the stormy month of June 1816. So much is explained by Mary Shelley herself. It is not well known, however, that the stormy weather was the result of an Indonesian volcano, which affected the atmosphere of the northern hemisphere for three years, leading to crop failure, riots and starvation. Mary Shelley's other writings of the period, as well as Frankenstein, reveal her interest in, and concern for, nature and the countryside. To a large extent, the novel is a reflection of these concerns at a time when the natural world was in crisis.'

(Source: Bill Phillips 2006 P.59)




Now let us go back to that originary narrative, which we discussed in the previous lectures, and in it we talked about how the moment of inception in Villa Diodati had implications for the structure and content of Shelley's *Frankenstein*. So we know that the idea for the novel emerged at the Villa Diodati, but we still have to consider how far the ambiance of the weather, the hostile weather had implications for the resonances, the thematic resonances, as well as their structural principles of this novel.

So the novel emerged at the Villa Diodati, on the shores of Lake Geneva during the stormy month of June 1816. So much is explained by Mary Shelley herself in the preface. It is not well known, however, that the stormy weather was the result of an Indonesian volcano, which affected the atmosphere of the northern hemisphere for three years, leading to crop failure, riots and starvation. Mary Shelly's other writings of the period as well as *Frankenstein* reveal her interest in and concern for nature and the countryside. To a large extent, the novel is a reflection of these concerns at a time when the natural world was in crisis.

So what is very apparent is the context in which Mary Shelly produced this novel, how she got the idea for the novel, but we really do not know the implications of the hostile weather during that period. And in fact, the Indonesian volcano is much talked about and because of that eruption, because of the kind of the migration of the fume, so to speak, to the northern hemisphere had produced a lot of negative impacts in terms of the cultivation. So there was crop failure which led to riots and people starved.

So these implications of hostile weather is something that Mary Shelly had observed really acutely and that was also kind of symbolically written into this fiction *Frankenstein*. So, this novel also reveals, Mary Shelley's deep interest in nature, how nature changes its patterns and how that change has an impact on the way the society kind of shifts and changes in order to adapt. So this novel kind of reflects on that, speculates on this, and it kind of discusses that idea in a very, very subtle manner.

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## The storm

This storm reappears twice in Frankenstein, firstly as a boyhood memory:

"When I was about fifteen years old we had retired to our house near Belrive, when we witnessed a most violent and terrible thunder-storm. It advanced from behind the mountain of Jura; and the thunder burst at once with frightful loudness from various quarters of the heavens. I remained, while the storm lasted, watching its progress with curiosity and delight. As I stood at the door, on a sudden I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak, which stood about twenty yards from our house; and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump".

(Source: Eli Philips, 2006, P.83)




There are a couple of storms, there are two storms in the novel. And the first storm is a boyhood memory for Victor Frankenstein, who I am quoting from the novel, he says that “when I was about 15 years old, we had retired to a house near Belrive, when we witnessed a most violent and terrible thunder storm. It advanced from behind the mountain of Jura; and the thunder burst at once with frightful loudness from various quarters of the heavens. I remained, while the storm lasted watching its progress with curiosity and delight. As I stood at the door, on a sudden I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak, which stood about 20 yards from our house; and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump.”

When you read this passage on a very literal level, it kind of depicts for the readers, the impact of a kind of horrifying terrible thunder-storm. Its violence is kind of illustrated through the impact on this oak tree. But there is, as I have been pointing out a symbolic resonance to the hostile weather and that symbolism is what is very, very poignant here.

So there is a very old and beautiful oak, and that is important. That oak could be representative of several ideas. It could represent the promise of Victor Frankenstein. It could represent tradition itself, the continuity of tradition and that gets attacked. And that is what this terrible and violent terrible thunderstorm attacks. And when it is over, you can see that the tree kind of burst into fire and at the end of that episode, nothing remains, but a blasted stump.

So that is where there was a powerful message that there is rupture in Frankenstein, it is a gothic rupture and something new and terrible is born, which is frightful to look and that is what Frankenstein does when he kind of births that monster, it is so terrible to look that he kind of flees from that sight, from the horrid sight of the monster, the creature that he had brought into this world.

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## The second storm

What is interesting about this second storm is the sudden appearance of the monster:

"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" (Shelley 1998: y 6). It is as if the storm were responsible for the creature's existence: it is 'illuminated' and 'discovered' by the lightning in a rather similar way to later cinematic depictions of the monster's birth".

(Source: Bill Phillips, 2006, P.63)




The second storm in the novel and the second storm is associated with a sudden appearance of the monster. And I am quoting from the novel here: "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 demon to whom I had given life." It is as if the storm were responsible for the creature's existence. It is illuminated and discovered by lightning in a rather similar way to later cinematic depictions of the monster's birth.

So the storm is significant in a sense that, in a very primitive way it lights up the features of the creature, very, very clearly vividly to Victor Frankenstein. So he kind of looks at the creature and through his eyes, the readers are also looking at that creature, it is gigantic, it is massive stature, it is huge, because if you have read that novel, you would know that Victor had to work with big parts, he kind of finds it easier to kind of put together this body in a bigger way than in a smaller fashion, because it is easier to work in a larger scale.

So its gigantic stature is very threatening and it is deformed in its aspect. There is disability of some kind and it does not kind of belong to humanity because it is hideous. And look at the way in which Frankenstein calls this creature as the wretch, something which is in the margins, which is pathetic as well as horrifying. It is a filthy dirty demon and he had given life to it. So, the storm is illuminating this creature in a physical and metaphorical way for the creator as well as for the readers. And this moment is made much use of in later kind of cinematic adaptations as well. It is a powerful scene and the storm is used to great effect in the adaptations.



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## Monster and the Landscape

'It is surely no coincidence that the monster's movements are perpetually mountainwards and northwards, towards the cold, barren places where human survival, indeed life itself, is threatened, and ultimately extinguished, just as much life in the northern hemisphere between 1816 and 1818 was similarly threatened and extinguished by darkness and cold'.

(Source: Bill Philips, 2006, P59)



Now let us kind of further probe the relationship between the landscape, the hostile landscape and the monster. It is not a coincidence according to the critic Bill Philips, that the monster's movements are perpetually mountainwards and northwards, towards the cold, barren places where human survival, indeed life itself, is threatened and ultimately extinguished, just as much life in the northern hemisphere between 1816 and 1818 was similarly threatened and extinguished by darkness and cold.

So that reality of that period between 1816 and 1818 is what is kind of depicted in the arid, in the sense that, in the frigid landscapes to which this monster is constantly traveling to. So those landscapes are hardly the place for human survival for life itself, but the monster kind of moves towards it perpetually towards the mountains, towards northwards. And the area is kind of is an area of darkness and coldness, there is hardly any warm. So the monster seems

to kind of inhabit those spaces and thereby underlining its inhumanity, so to speak. So it is a different kind of creature which prefers a different kind of landscape.

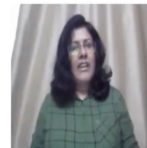
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## Gothic Landscape



'On returning to Switzerland, Frankenstein marries his fiancée Elizabeth, only for her to be murdered in her bridal chamber. Frankenstein's response is to seek vengeance and the novel concludes with his pursuit of the monster ever northwards, to the Arctic Sea. In a message left by the creature Frankenstein reads: "Follow me; I seek the everlasting ices of the north, where you will feel the misery of cold and frost, to which I am impassive'.

(Source: Bill Phillips, 2006, P.59)



Further implications of the gothic landscape in terms of the metaphoric figurations of the monster's character. When Frankenstein returns to Switzerland and marries his fiancée Elizabeth, we know that she gets murdered in her bridal chamber by the creature, by the monster. Frankenstein's response is to seek vengeance and the novel concludes with his pursuit of the monster ever northwards to the Arctic Sea. In a message left by the creature Frankenstein reads: "Follow me, I seek the everlasting ices of the north, where you will feel the misery of cold and frost, to which I am impassive."

So these are some of the powerful lines, powerful ideas in the entire novel. You can also kind of sense the gothic flavor, emerging the gothic kind of mood emerging from the landscape. We did see previously in our discussions about the sublime, as to how something massive, something hostile is simultaneously beautiful as well as kind of awe inspiring and striking terror into the hearts of human beings.

So these everlasting ices of the north are sublime to look at, they are beautiful, but they are also hostile, they are not conducive to human habitation and survival, yet the creature kind of haunts these spaces. And there is a connection between the misery of cold and frost that one can experience in these northern landscapes of ice. And the kind of reaction that the monster gets from society itself, like he is kind of cold shouldered. The monster is cold-shouldered not only by his creator, the father figure Victor, but also by the rest of society as well.

So that symbolic coldness seems to be kind of literalized in these moments of nature, in these kinds of pockets of nature. And it is very poignant to kind of see that the monster says that I am impassive, I am kind of immune to the hostility that emerges from the landscape. He says that I am used to it because of the experiences that he gathered from human society. So it is a very ironic poignant comment that comes from the mouth of the creature.

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## Monster and Gothic

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‘Everyone close to Frankenstein is touched by the hand of death, just as the natural world between 1816 and 1818 lay moribund beneath a cold, black sky. The monster’s behaviour, together with his ability to withstand unbelievable hardship and deprivation, clearly sets him apart from humanity. His indifference towards his victims, at least until the final chapter, is the indifference of a force of nature, capable neither of remorse, nor of rational justification; a monstrous volcano of destruction, spreading darkness and despair wherever he passes, like an angel of death. Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, then, attempts to give meaning to a natural disaster...’

Source: (Bill Phillips, 2006,p. 67)

  
NPTEL



How do they finally come to understand the nature of the relationship between the monster and the gothic landscape? We do realize that “everyone close to Frankenstein is touched by the hand of death, just as a natural world between 1816 and 1818 lay moribund beneath a cold, black sky. The monster's behaviour, together with its ability to understand unbelievable hardship and deprivation clearly sets him apart from humanity. His indifference towards his victims, at least until the final chapter is the indifference of a force of nature, in capable neither of remorse nor of rational justification. A monstrous volcano of destructions spreading darkness and despair wherever he passes, like an angel of death, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein then attempts to give meaning to a natural disaster.”

So if you look at this kind of criticism, you realize that just as Frankenstein the novel and is full of deaths, there are plenty of people who get murdered at the hands of the creature and Frankenstein is kind of horrified by the deaths, which are kind of somehow brought about by his actions, by his experimentation with the principle of life.



So the natural world is somehow embodied by this creature in this novel. And just as how nature was hostile to human society and how society itself had been forced to go into hiding in a figurative way, because of the tempestuous nature of the weather between 1816 and 1818, life itself in the fictional landscape of Frankenstein seems to have gone into hiding.

So, there is that kind of metaphorical signification between the two. And you also realize that the monster's ability to kind of withstand, kind of gigantic proportions of inhumanity from society, the deprivation that he undergoes, kind of sets him from humanity. He is somehow sub-human, because he has experienced so much hardship and still endures, and that makes them kind of different to the human. And his indifference as well towards his victims and that also marks him out as an other, the inability to empathize makes him kind of connected to the force of nature, which is impartial, which is indifferent to the sufferings of humanity.

Nature is not capable of remorse or of kind of any kind of justification, volcano will erupt. So, it is like that, the way the monster behaves towards his victims is like an element of nature and which is regardless to the sufferings of humanity to its effects. So, just as wild nature leaves havoc in its wake, Frankenstein's monster also does that. He leaves darkness in despair and he is like an angel of death. So, you can see how this criticism tries to kind of make sense of a natural disaster and its effects on Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.


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## Anti-Promethean?

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'Although Frankenstein was published during the Romantic era, it is an anti-Promethean work in that it criticises Promethean aspirations and is therefore anti-romantic (cf. Goetsch94). The Promethean aspiration in this case is that Victor tries to occupy the role of God or the woman, in "giving birth" to a sentient being.'

Source: <https://journals.sfu.ca/vict/index.php/vict/article/viewFile/151/78>

  
NPTEL



Now, we need to talk about the idea of Prometheus. In the previous lecture, we talked about how this novel has its subtitle, the modern Prometheus and how Frankenstein, the scientist

can be seen as a modern Prometheus because he tries to create a new race and Robert Walton also is kind of a Promethean figure because he tries to find a Northwest Sea passage.

So, yes, these ideas are there, but how does the novel ultimately treat the idea of the Promethean character, a character which tries to kind of offer salvation to humanity, rescue humanity. So, although Frankenstein was published during the romantic era, it is an anti-Promethean work, in that it criticizes Promethean aspirations and is therefore anti-romantic because ultimately, if you look at the novel Frankenstein, the scientist experimentations go horrifyingly wrong and Walton does not kind of end up triumphant.

So the Promethean aspiration in this case is that Victor tries to occupy the role of God or the woman in giving birth to a sentient being. So that Promethean aspiration of playing God or playing the woman or playing nature is kind of punished through that creature, that sentient being that Victor Frankenstein brings into the world. So he is attacked, chastise, punished through that creature itself and the punishment takes the form of the deaths of his beloved friends and wife.

So you can see how that notion itself is criticized really powerfully in this novel. So there is an anti-romantic sentiment, in such a kind of narrative trajectory where the Promethean figure is defeated. So it is also kind of anti-scientific because this novel also can be seen as a cautionary tale against a scientific project as well. So it offers a lot of complexities to the reader to kind of think through.

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## 'Monster without a soul?'

'As Gilbert notes, there are other ways to read Frankenstein's monster as a stand-in for Mary Shelley—and for femaleness in general. While pop culture loves to fixate on Victor as the mad scientist, some of the most moving parts of the book come from the monster's monologue, which Gilbert reads as "a philosophical meditation on what it means to be born without a 'soul' or a history, as well as an exploration of what it feels like to be a 'filthy mass that move[s] and talk[s], a thing, an other, a creature of the second sex.'"

Source: Bess Lovejoy <https://daily.jstor.org/mary-shelleys-obsession-with-the-cemetery/>



Let us now talk about the resonances of the symbol that the creature has become, there are arguments about what this monster stands for. This monster without a soul and as Sandra Gilbert notes there are other ways to read Frankenstein's monster as a stand-in for Mary Shelly. So, it can be a stand-in for the author herself and for femaleness in general, the monster can represent the abjection, the rejection suffered by women in general.

While pop culture loves to fixate on Victor as the mad scientist, some of the most moving parts of the book come from the monster's monologue, which Gilbert reads as a philosophical meditation and what it means to be born without a soul or a history, as well as an exploration of what it feels like to be a filthy mass that moves and talks, a thing, and other, a creature of the second sex.

So, while popular culture sees this as a cautionary tale against the excesses of science, that is just one narrative, the second narrative according to Gilbert, the more interesting narrative for her is that, the monster is given remarkable dialogues, remarkable conversations in this novel, remarkable monologues in this novel and those monologues can be considered as philosophical meditations, ruminations of this monster on what it means to have no history, no soul, no connections, no relations to the rest of society. And it just becomes, in the eyes of society, a simply a filthy mass that moves and talks, it becomes an object, a thing, an animal and other, a creature, which is just secondary to the male.

So you can see the various representations of hierarchy, which can be projected onto this monster. So for this reason, this is a particularly resonant novel, which will kind of find leadership among an array of people across nations and times.

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## Value System



"Both the creature Victor creates and Victor himself can be seen as monsters. Both cross socially established boundaries, albeit mostly different ones. The creature crosses the border between life and death, and humanity and bestiality, while Victor crosses the border between the human and the divine. Moreover, they also cross physical borders by pursuing each other through several different countries, thus spreading the threat they pose. By assembling a creature from dead parts and giving it life, Victor violates the sanctity of human life and death, thereby delineating said sanctity as a norm. The monster's behaviour represents disregard for human life and callousness, thereby underscoring the respective value."

Source: <https://journals.sfu.ca/vict/index.php/vict/article/viewFile/151/76>



Now, ultimately, how do we see the value system of this novel *Frankenstein* by Shelly, who is the real monster that can be also asked of this novel. Of course, we have a very visible monster in the creature that Victor creates, but there is a symbolic monster as well, which could be the creator, the father itself, or it could be society because it kind of turns this creature into a monster by rejecting it, by not accommodating it.

So ultimately both the creature, Victor creates and Victor himself can be seen as monsters. Both cross socially established boundaries, albeit mostly different ones. So there is a lot of border crossing happening in this novel. The creature crosses the border between life and death, he is kind of brought back from death, so as to speak by Victor, so it crosses humanity and bestiality, is it human or is it a bestial thing, it seems to be both. The creature seems to be both while Victor crosses the border between the human and the divine. So Victor himself plays both God as well as the human. So he also crosses various domains here and that becomes hugely problematic.

Moreover, they also cross physical boundaries, physical borders, by pursuing each other through several different countries, thus spreading the threat they pose. So this kind of threat is symbolically carried over to other countries, so Victor *Frankenstein* seems to be taking the idea everywhere, the idea of how to kind of do this border crossing in a way.

So, by assembling a creature from dead parts and giving it life, Victor violates the sanctity of human life and death. So that is potent, that is crucial, that is why it is something we need to remember constantly. Victor is the ultimate Prometheus who does what he is not expected to

do. He violates the sanctity of human life and death and thereby delineating set sanctity as a norm.

So while he does transgress, through his transgression, we are told that sanctity is the norm, is the ideal that divine should not be questioned, the divine should not be usurped of what it, should not be usurped of its duty. So that is what Victor does, he usurps the rights of nature. He usurps the rights of the mother, he usurps the rights of the feminine. He takes away the duties of someone else, be it God, be it other female, be it nature and that violation is punished.

The monster's behavior represents disregard for human life and callousness. So of course the monster also transgresses by being inhuman, even though he is put together from human parts, so that disregard to human life and callousness is also punished. So you can see how through these two monsters, the value system is reinforced to the reader in a very, very clear manner, in a powerful manner. If you transgress, you will be punished.

Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.