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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Mary Shelley's

Frankenstein

from

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by

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Frankenstein*

F^{RANKENSTEIN} is an example of a very early Romantic novel. It is told as a retrospective in letters, complete with stories within stories.

The narrator of the story is a young adventurer, Robert Walton, who meets an older scientist, Victor Frankenstein. Frankenstein narrates his story, which Walton writes in letters home.

There are certain style points in the story that indicate it was written at a time when the art of the novel was still beginning to take shape. Unlike modern stories, *Frankenstein* has very little dialogue. When characters speak (and there are really only three characters that contribute the bulk of the text) it is in chapter form, not the back—and—forth banter we are familiar with today. Most of the information the reader receives is through exposition by the narrator of that particular section, not through exchanges between the characters.

Another style point is that the language of the characters is not conversational. Even in the brief moments of dialog, the characters speak very formally and eloquently, which is not what one would expect to find in informal conversation between friends or lovers. This stems from the fact that there was still a separation between the written and spoken word, and even when the words were theoretically spoken, they were, in fact, **written**.

One interesting aspect of the novel is that it was written by a woman. Not only were female writers rare in that day, they also tended not to write such dark, intense literature. They tended, instead, to deal with typical human situations like love and marriage and social customs—not science fiction and horror.

Part of Shelley's uniqueness might have been inspired by actual events in her own life. She had recently lost a child, and scholars believe this event had much to do with her preoccupation with the creation of life only to have that creation turn and destroy the creator.

Psychoanalytic Criticism Applied to *Frankenstein*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses solely on the text itself with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining the conflicts, characters, dream sequences and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as—yet—undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level, to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory believes that dreams are where a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



Activity One

Compare and Contrast Frankenstein and His Creature

1. Divide the class into five groups. Assign each group one of the following chapters to reread and note the similarities and differences in the emotional development of Frankenstein and his creation: Chapters I, II, XI, XII, XV.
2. Have each group report back to the class and then have the class examine the types of “people” the creature and Frankenstein become by the end of the novel.

For consideration:

- What seems to be Frankenstein’s lingering memory of his childhood? What is the overall feeling he has of his past?
- Are there any severe flaws in Frankenstein’s character that foreshadow what is to come? Are they considered flaws by the people around him at the time?
- What is the creature’s lingering memory of his “childhood?” What seems to be his overall feeling toward his past?
- What is the creature’s initial reaction toward human beings? How do they react to him? At first, what does he do in retaliation?
- By the end of the story, what type of man is Frankenstein? What type of creature is the creature? Who has changed the most since his “childhood?”

Archetypal Approach Applied to *Frankenstein*



Notes on the Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all very closely interrelated. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross—cultural philosophy.

Critics who read texts with the mythological/archetypal approach are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is “a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested.” He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology (long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe). Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.) Every culture has a creation story, a life after death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!



Activity One

Form an Argument that Either Supports or Contradicts the Theory that Frankenstein Is an Archetypal Hero

1. Put the students into small groups and have one student from each group read and take notes on one of the following chapters:

- Letter IV, Chapters I, II, III, IV, V, XXIII, and XXIV.

2. Have the groups then discuss the progression of Frankenstein's life and answer the following questions:

- What characteristics does Frankenstein have that qualify him as an archetypal hero?
- What events in Frankenstein's life are indicators that Shelley intended him to be a hero?
- Is there evidence that Frankenstein might not be a typical hero? If so, what is it?
- Is there another character in the story who fits the description of the archetypal hero better than Frankenstein?
- Is there a modern—day character who is similar to Frankenstein? If so, who? What do they have in common? What makes them different?
- Frankenstein identifies himself as a tragic hero in the story. What does he believe is his tragic flaw? What other personality trait might also be considered a tragic flaw in Frankenstein's case?
- What other archetypal characters does Frankenstein resemble?



Formalist Approach Applied to *Frankenstein*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a stuffy, rigid, and inaccessible means to read literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with form, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all linked to the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became a standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work to understand what the work was about. The Formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form means something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Activity One

Examine the Structure and Nuances of the Story and How They Shape the Overall Tone of the Book

1. Break the students up into small groups and have them divide the book up among themselves so that every chapter will be re-examined.
2. Have the students then find examples of the following literary tools and share them with the group: Cadence, Repetition, and Imagery.

For consideration:

- What does the Creature's particular cadence sound like? Why would Shelley make him use language the way he does? Is it believable?
- Are there any other characters in the work who have a distinct, and therefore meaningful, cadence? Is there a difference between each gender's cadence? Each social class? If so, what is revealed about them through those differences?
- What specific image is repeated over and over again when Frankenstein describes the Creature?
- What language is frequently used by the Creature to describe his creator?
- What biblical reference seems to play a major role in the story? Why would Shelley use that particular reference?