

## **From Ghoulies and Ghosties and Long-Legged Beasties and Things that Go Bump in the Night, Good Lord, deliver us! Or, Mary Shelley and Frankenstein**

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Mary Godwin Shelley was born on August 30, 1797 in London, England. Her father was William Godwin, English novelist, philosopher, proud atheist, and promotor of free love. Her mother was Mary Wollstonecraft, English writer and ardent feminist who published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, widely regarded as the first book on feminism. Sadly, her mother died of puerperal fever within eleven days of Mary's birth. Mary blamed herself for her mother's death, which haunted her for the rest of her life and greatly influenced her subsequent writing.

Mary's older half-sister, Fanny Imlay, was born illegitimately to her mother. For Mary's birth to be considered legitimate, her parents married five months before she was born even though her father considered marriage an abomination. Four years after his wife's untimely death, William Godwin married Mary Jane Clairmont, a well-educated woman who had two children, Charles and Claire. Although the marriage was a success, Mary did not get along with her step-mother. Perhaps because of this Mary lived for a while during adolescence with a family in Scotland.

As Mary was growing up, her father and stepmother were hosts to many famous guests. One such guest was Robert Owen, the Welsh textile manufacturer, philanthropist, and social reformer who eventually was one of the founders of the utopian community of New Harmony, Indiana.

In March, 1814 on one of her trips home from Scotland, Mary met English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Because of similar political and social views Shelley had become good friends with Mary's father whom he promised to bail out of debt from his failing publishing business. Subsequently Mary and Percy began having secret trysts at Mary Wollstonecraft's grave in the St. Pancras Church graveyard. Legend has it that Mary gave up her virginity on her mother's grave. Much to Mary's dismay, her father disapproved of her relationship to Shelley; consequently, along with Mary's step-sister Claire, they eloped to France in July 1814.

Thus, began a lurid relationship which rivals Peyton Place and other modern soap operas. Percy Shelley was a married man, and his wife Harriet was pregnant with their first son.

Returning to our story, the trio was followed in hot pursuit by Mary's stepmother Mary Jane Godwin who found them in Calais, France, but could not persuade them to return to England. Once arriving in France, the trio set out for Paris, but because of dwindling finances, their transportation began in a carriage, progressed to a donkey, and finally ended on foot. Eventually they arrived in Lucerne, Switzerland, but because

they were almost out of money, were forced to return to England by boat in September 1814.

Upon return to England Mary found herself pregnant. Mary, Percy, and Claire lived together in various places and Percy often left home in order to dodge creditors. It's likely that Claire and Percy were lovers. It's also likely that Mary was not pleased with Percy's joyful reaction to the birth of his son by his estranged wife Harriet. However, Mary remained madly in love with Percy.

On February 22, 1815 Mary gave birth to a baby girl who was two months premature. Within two weeks of giving birth, Mary's daughter died and subsequently Mary suffered her first depression which was possibly caused by her guilt and grief over her daughter's death. Mary became pregnant the second time and on January 24, 1816 gave birth to her son William, just 11 months after giving birth.

In May 1816 a quartet consisting of Mary, Percy, their son William, and Claire traveled to Lake Geneva, Switzerland where they met with Lord Gordon George Byron and where they made history. Apparently, that's not all that had been made, because Claire had become pregnant by Lord Byron prior to her departure from England. Byron had previously had an affair with his half sister Augusta. Subsequently the British public coined the term, the "League of Incest," for this group of individuals who flaunted British mores.

The summer of 1816 was cold and wet, likely due to the volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). Because of the inclement weather the group had little to do but sit around the fire in Lord Byron's villa and tell German ghost stories, one of which described the reanimation of a stolen corpse by electricity. Byron eventually proposed that each write a ghost story. A quartet consisting of Mary, Percy, Lord Byron, and Byron's physician, John William Palidori, set out to do exactly this. The result was to rock the literary, theatrical, cinematic, and bio-ethical worlds for years to come.

Mary, who described her ghost story creation differently over the course of years, eventually published *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, in 1818. In her 1831 revised edition of *Frankenstein* Mary described how her creation came to be:

"There were four of us. The noble author began a tale, a fragment of which he printed at the end of his poem of Mazeppa. Shelley, more apt to embody ideas and sentiments in the radiance of brilliant imagery, and in the music of the most melodious verse that adorns our language...commenced one founded on the experiences of his early life. Poor Palidori had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady, who was so punished for peeping through a key-hole...but when she was reduced to a worse condition than the renowned Tom of Coventry, he did not know what to do with her, and was obliged to despatch her to the tomb of the Capulets. The illustrious poets...annoyed by the platitude of prose, speedily relinquished their uncongenial task.

I busied myself *to think of a story*...One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror—one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart...I thought and pondered vainly...*Have you thought of a story?* I was asked each morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative...

Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these...was discussed...the nature...of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated. They talked of the experiments of Dr. Darwin...who preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion...Perhaps a corpse would be re-animated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth.

Night waned upon this talk, and even the witching hour had gone by, before we retired to rest...I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie...I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handywork, horror-stricken. He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade; that this thing, which had received such imperfect animation, would subside into dead matter; and he might sleep in the belief that the silence of the grave would quench for ever the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life. He sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes.”

Although Mary's creation was originally conceived as a short story, with Percy's help and encouragement the story morphed into a full-length novel over the course of two years. It was originally published anonymously in 1818 and was mistakenly thought to be Percy Shelley's work.

Mary's novel develops from the main characters' letters which narrate the story of Victor Frankenstein and his creation of a monster. Frankenstein in Mary's novel is born into a wealthy Italian family. His mother dies of scarlet fever just before he entered the University of Ingolstadt in Germany. While at university he studied chemistry and developed the idea of creating a humanoid from purloined body parts. He goes on to create a "creature" eight feet tall which he animates. The creature escapes, however,

and flees to Switzerland where he lives near a cottage inhabited by a blind father and his family. It is here that the creature learns to read books and speak. Eventually Victor and the creature meet again and the creature pleads to Frankenstein to create a female companion. In response to the creature's threat to kill Victor's friends and family, Frankenstein reluctantly agrees. Frankenstein builds the creature in the Scottish Orkney Islands, but destroys his new creation before he has finished because of his fear that the creature and his companion will create a super race and destroy humanity. Upon discovering this, the creature vows to be with Victor on his wedding night. Back in Switzerland Victor marries his betrothed but she (Elizabeth) is strangled by the creature on their wedding night. Enraged, Victor pursues the creature to the North Pole, but Frankenstein dies on board a ship after being rescued from an ice floe. The creature mourns over Victor's body, vows to kill himself, and leaves never to be seen again. Thus, ends Mary's novel.

*Frankenstein* is a fascinating travelogue which describes scenes and places in England, Scotland, Switzerland, and the Arctic. It is richly descriptive as evidenced by this short passage of Frankenstein's travel in Switzerland to Chamonix and Mont Blanc:

"I performed the first part of my journey on horseback. I afterwards hired a mule, as the more sure-footed, and least liable to receive injury on these rugged roads. The weather was fine: it was about the middle of the month of August, nearly two months after the death of Justine; that miserable epoch from which I dated all my woe. The weight upon my spirit was sensibly lightened as I plunged yet deeper in the ravine of Arve. The immense mountains and precipices that overhung me on every side—the sound of the river raging among the rocks, and the dashing of the waterfalls around, spoke of a power mighty as Omnipotence—and I ceased to fear, or to bend before any being less almighty than that which had created and ruled the elements, here displayed in their most terrific guise. Still, as I ascended higher, the valley assumed a more magnificent and astonishing character. Ruined castles hanging on the precipices of piny mountains; the impetuous Arve, and cottages every here and there peeping forth from among the trees, formed a scene of singular beauty. But it was augmented and rendered sublime by the mighty Alps, whose white and shining pyramids and domes towered above all, as belonging to another earth, the habitations of another race of beings.

I passed the bridge of Pélissier, where the ravine, which the river forms, opened before me, and I began to ascend the mountain that overhangs it. Soon after I entered the valley of Chamounix. This valley is more wonderful and sublime, but not so beautiful and picturesque, as that of Servox, through which I had just passed. The high and snowy mountains were its immediate boundaries; but I saw no more ruined castles and fertile fields. Immense glaciers approached the road; I heard the rumbling thunder of the falling avalanche, and marked the smoke of its passage. Mont Blanc, the supreme and magnificent Mont Blanc,

raised itself from the surrounding *aiguilles*, and its tremendous *dôme* overlooked the valley.”

Like many other novels that Mary wrote, *Frankenstein* was autobiographical. Mary visited many places mentioned in *Frankenstein*. Like Victor Frankenstein, Mary lost her mother. She also lost her first born due to prematurity. Mary was grief stricken at both losses and it's not hard to imagine that she wished both had lived and that she fantasized reanimating them. Her telling of the story of *Frankenstein* and the creature may be how she dealt psychologically with the deaths of her mother and child.

I wonder to what extent Mary's story was influenced by her spiritual views, about which we know little. Her husband Percy Shelly was a confirmed atheist as was her father. In her novel Mary referred to *Frankenstein* as “Adam,” which recalls the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Here Victor Frankenstein has usurped the role of God in creating a humanoid. Like a Greek tragedy, the story does not end well for Victor. I was also reminded of the long conversation in the Biblical book of Job when Victor and his creation have an animated discussion about whether to create a female companion. Should Victor play God for the second time? God's answer in the book of Job is a resounding “No!” In Mary's novel, tragedy ensues when humans usurp God's role of creation.

So far as is known, Mary Shelley was irreligious. However, she never espoused atheistic beliefs like her father and husband. After a turbulent adolescence, throughout the rest of her life she behaved in a morally upright and respectable manner.

Enough of speculation, our story of Mary Shelley does not end here.

Mary and Percy returned to England in September 1816. Mary's half-sister Fanny Imlay committed suicide with laudanum in early October. Then in December Percy's wife Harriett drowned herself in a lake in Hyde Park. On December 30 Percy and Mary were married at St. Mildred's Church in London, thus healing the rift with Mary's parents. By this time Mary was pregnant with her third child Clara who was born in early September.

In March 1818 the couple, accompanied by Claire and her child Alba, left England for an extended stay in Italy. Shortly after arriving Alba was placed in the custody of her father, Lord Byron. For a time, Percy loaned money to Mary's father and stepmother because they were often in debt. Mary and Percy lived a peripatetic existence in Italy which was punctuated by the deaths of their two children, Clara in September 1818, and William in June 1819. These losses led to another of Mary's deep depressions. On November 12, 1819 the Shelley's fourth child Percy was born. While in Italy both Mary and Percy continued their writing careers. In 1822 Percy and Mary moved to an isolated villa on the Bay of Lerici near San Terenzo. Because of its isolation Mary again became depressed. However, Percy, a major contributor to Mary's depression, chose to entertain himself by sailing in his new sailboat which he had bought. Unfortunately, Percy, his friend Edward Trelawny, and a boat-boy were caught

in a storm, capsized, and drowned on July 8. Ten days later their bodies were found washed up on a beach. Percy was cremated and buried on the beach.

Mary returned to England in July 1823. She eked out an existence by continuing to write her novels, editing Percy's poems, and living off a small pension that Percy's father Sir Timothy had agreed to pay only if the sums were reimbursed to his estate when he died, and William received an inheritance. Although she wanted to write or have someone else write a biography of her late husband, Sir Timothy threatened to stop her pension if she did so. Mary never remarried, although she developed several close relationships with various men after Percy died. One such relationship was with Robert Dale Owen, son of the Robert Owen who founded New Harmony. Although Owen fell in love with Mary, she never returned his affections; She chose instead to care for her son Percy and provide financial support for her father and stepmother until they died.

In her later years Mary was plagued by headaches and bouts of intermittent paralysis. It is speculated that she suffered from a brain tumor when she died on February 1, 1851. One might also speculate that Mary suffered from a conversion reaction, given all the traumas that she had endured. Only a cat-scan or an MRI would have provided a definitive diagnosis, but these modern radiographic techniques had yet to be invented. When Mary died it was discovered that Percy's remains had been excavated, his heart and a few locks of hair extracted, and these had preserved by Mary in her writing box for all eternity.

Although best known for her novel *Frankenstein*, Mary's writing career spanned several decades and included six other novels, two travelogues about Europe, at least 25 short stories, many articles and reviews, six biographies, and many poems. In addition, she edited many of her husband's and father's works.

*Frankenstein*, Mary's most enduring work, has stood the test of time. Scores of plays have been written about *Frankenstein*. And who can forget James Whale's 1931 movie *Frankenstein* starring Boris Karloff and Colin Clive. Unfortunately, Hollywood turned *Frankenstein* into a horror film from a tragedy and macerated the storyline. In contrast to the novel *Frankenstein* became the name of the creature and the dead reconstructed body parts were brought to life by electricity generated by a vicious thunderstorm. Many theatregoers, including me, never read the novel because they assumed it was so like the movie that it would be a waste of time.

The movie *Frankenstein* birthed a new genre of horror films including *The Bride of Frankenstein*, *The Son of Frankenstein*, and so on. Most of us are of an age to remember *Abbott and Costello Meets Frankenstein* in 1948. Television's creations, the *Adams Family*, starring Ted Cassidy as Lurch, premiered in 1964 on ABC and the *Munsters* starring Fred Gwynne as Herman Munster premiered on CBS, also in 1964.

Posing a final question: Does art imitate life or does life imitate art? In Mary Shelley's case it may have been both.

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