Richard Rothwell's portrait of Mary Shelley

Tower and ruins of Frankenstein Castle. Photo: Pascal Rehfeldt/Wikimedia

Actor Boris Karloff's iconic portrayal of Frankenstein's monster.

Frankenstein at 200

2018 is being celebrated as the bicentenary of Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein. *As the world eerily embraces the possibilities of human cloning, organ harvesting, animal/human transplants, artificial intelligence, and even sexbots, the boundaries between humans and machines/things are becoming problematic. Although Mary Shelley's novella lacks details on the bio-engineering behind the creation of the man-made, man-like monster, since its publication* Frankenstein *has acted as a springboard for the human imagination. This week's In Focus engages with the nuanced text with particular focus on the context of its composition.*

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There is something electrifying about Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. For two-hundred years, the novella written by an eighteen-year-old has shocked the literary world and rejuvenated its readers, making them alive to the regular rhythm of the human heart with all its passion and emotion. Any avid reader will notice my purposeful use of CPR analogy here. After all, Shelley employs the most radical innovation of her time, Galvanism, to ponder over the sublime beauty and subsequent horror that electricity entails. The subtitle of the book, *A Modern Prometheus*, stretches the idea further to link myth with science. Prometheus the Titan is known for stealing fire from heaven and giving it as a gift to mankind, invoking the wrath of Zeus and an eternal punishment for himself. In Shelley's rendition, Viktor Frankenstein uses electricity to bring the dead back to life. But the Prometheus comparison in the subtitle is far from simple. Is it the mad scientist Viktor who is compared to Prometheus for his life-giving

Byron to spend some time at his mansion, Villa Diodati, in Geneva. It was a time ill known for its inclement weather. A volcanic eruption in Mount Tambora in Indonesia caused a worldwide natural catastrophe leading Europe to experience the "Year without Summer." The cold temperature and incessant rain compelled the guests to seek indoor activities and Byron proposed that they pass the time by composing horror stories. While Byron and Percy Shelley failed to produce anything significant, Byron's physician John Polidori came up with the plot of *The Vampyre* and Mary with *Frankenstein*.

She recalled, how on that night she had a vision: "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 Creator of the world."

Mary and the guests had discussed
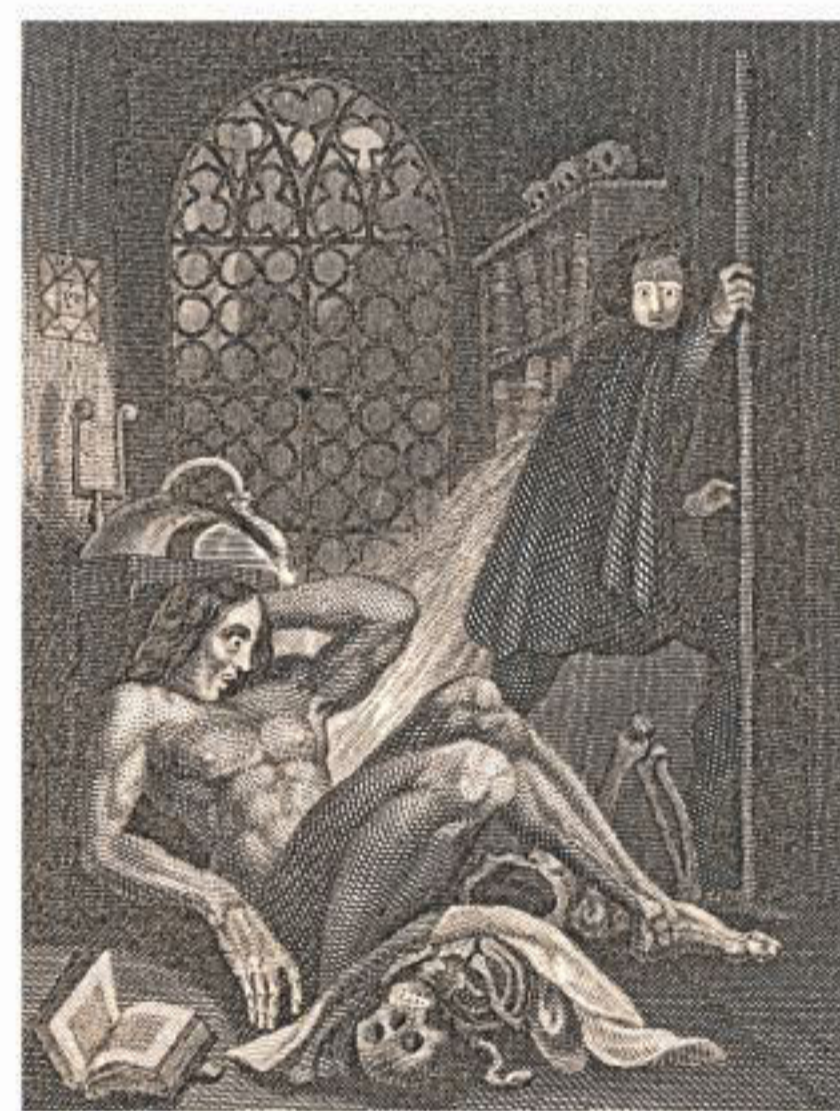
Steel engraving (993 x 71mm) to the revised edition of Frankenstein by Mary Shelley, published by Colburn and Bentley, London 1831. The novel was first published in 1818.

the prefix "franken" meaning "non-natural" and "stein" suggesting "steep rocky peaks." It is no coincidence then that a novel featuring an eight-feet monster that becomes terrifying or destructive to its maker has Frankenstein as its title.

The plotting of the novel is also indicative of the regression of Mary's deep-seated anxiety. She had earlier ran away with a married man, a student of her father, William Godwin, the famed philosopher and political writer. Mary's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft—the author of the feminist manifesto, *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*—died soon after her daughter was born. Her father remarried their neighbour much to the trauma of the teenager Mary who tried to free herself by running away with Percy. While the couple travelled through Europe amid financial hardship, they heard the news of Percy's first wife Harriet killing herself. Mary was guilt ridden. She gave birth to a baby girl who died soon after. For Mary this was an uncanny reminder of losing her mother in a similar situation. In her post-partum depression, she would often dream of resuscitating her dead child back to life by warming up the dead body with her hands. It is no coincidence then that the plot of Frankenstein involves creating human beings without the necessity of wombs. It is tempting to trace the autobiographical elements of the novel, but *Frankenstein* has a larger scope that has kept on widening in the last 200 years.

Central to the novella is the scientist Viktor Frankenstein who creates a living being out of dismembered body parts, but then abandons his own creation. Instead of being proud of his scientific heroism that has matched divinity, Viktor withdraws from the scene like a coward. The creature pursues his progenitor in search of his own identity, and in the process he learns the ways of the world—desire, love, hate, self-preservation, revenge.

The creature is not instinctively evil; he is born with a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate of memory. It is his encounter with humans that transforms him into a monster. When Viktor assembles the body parts, he is rather in awe with the concept of creating something sublime.

He says: "Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. Pursuing these reflections, I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption." (Ch. 4)

Viktor's optimism is common to any modern scientist. For instance, a stem cell bioengineer today would share a similar sentiment about his desire to create organs out of cells. Viktor's enthusiasm, however, is short lived. As soon as the dead body starts moving, Viktor is gripped with fear. He becomes horrified by the incomplete physical features of his creation: "his yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries…his hair was of a lustrous black…his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes…his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips." He also has a premonition that this "miserable monster" (Ch. 5) is going to kill the person he loves the most, his cousin Elizabeth Lavenza, to whom he is betrothed. Instantly, he leaves his creation, which was a culmination of his eros, his desire, imagination, and will to create.

Mary, an ardent reader of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, provides enough clues to make the abandoned creature a mirror image of the biblical fallen man. Later, in his conversation with Frankenstein, the creature even claims himself as Frankenstein's son and compares himself with Adam. The no-name monster is thereby a shadow of a "being" with the urgency of "becoming" complete. Left to his own devices, the monster takes shelter in a house where a German man Felix is teaching language to his Turkish beloved, Safie. As the daughter of a Muslim merchant, Safie too is the Other as she too is running away from a cruel father, as well as the harem, only to find refuge in a European household. It is through eavesdropping and voyeuristic gaze that the monster and her female doppelganger become cognizant of human language and history.

The monster learns to read, and from the diary of his maker he gleans information about the purpose of his creation. He sets off to find his maker in his Geneva home, where he chances upon Viktor's younger brother who calls him "a monster" and threatens him saying that his father Alphonse

Frankenstein will punish him. In a fit of rage, the creature commits his first crime as he kills William. As the story unfolds, the monster murders Viktor's friend Henry Clerval and fiancée Elizabeth to make his maker go through the pain he was experiencing—loneliness. He is also responsible for two others deaths in the novel: William's governess Justine who is wrongfully sentenced to death as the police could not catch the real murderer, and Alphonse, who dies of a broken heart.

But who is actually responsible for these deaths? Viktor Frankenstein, the man who created the monster, or the monster who was deprived of human empathy, particularly that of his creator's? To answer these questions we need to scan the line that separates the man from the monster. In Mary Shelley's novel the distinction is far from clear.

Perhaps a reflection on the etymologies of these two categories may offer us insight into Mary's mindset. The word "man", shorter version of human has its Latin root in *homo*, and in Indo-European source, *ghomon*, meaning "earthly being." Monster, in English, refers to "malformed animal or human," and the word is derived from Latin *monstrum*, meaning, "divine sign; abnormal shape." The other root is *monere*, suggesting "to admonish, warn, advice," or *moneyo-*, suffixed form of root "men", implying "to think." In other words, Frankenstein is a nuanced identity that includes both a man and a monster. The character is both tangible and intangible.

Two hundred years after Frankenstein, the novella is still a source of many pithy discussions on the man/monster dichotomy. What is the ethical responsibility of a scientist? Why does Viktor fail to own up to his creation? Why couldn't he prevent the death of Justine? Why do we annihilate the Other that we simply fail to understand? Can the roles of God and humans be reversed? Does such a reversal give rise to the monster? Why are both "Frankensteins" devoid of female companionship?

The bicentenary of the publication of *Frankenstein* provides an opportunity to revisit these issues and more. With the creation of AI, successful cloning of animals, harvesting of stem cells, the fictional world of Mary Shelley is more real than ever. But one thing that science can never do without, a thing that is germane to both man and monster (i.e. both Frankensteins) is the power to think. It is thinking that makes a monster a monster; Frankenstein becomes the monster only when he starts thinking about revenge. Conversely, it is the noble thought of keeping the monster at bay that makes a human a human.

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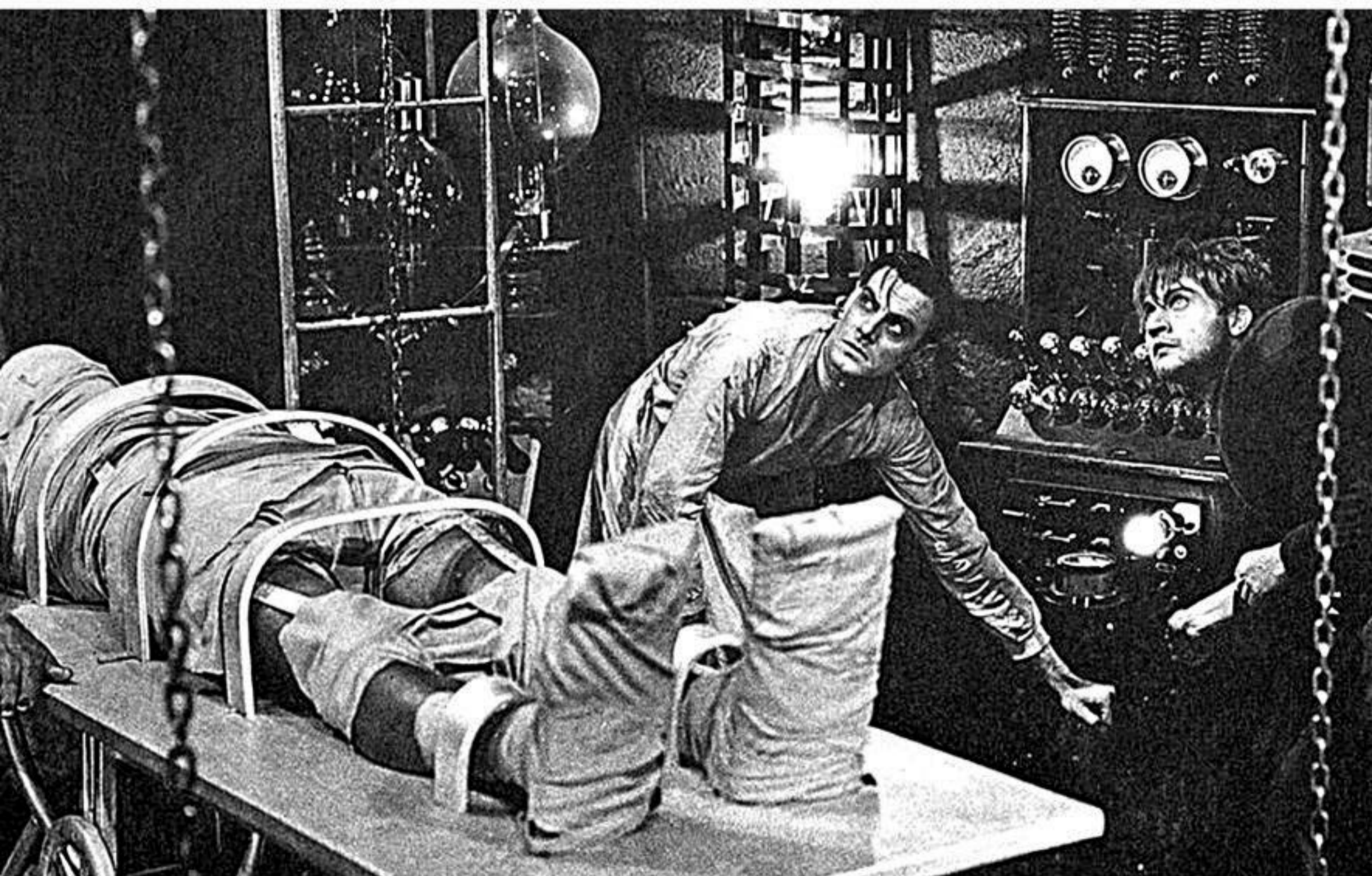
Colin Clive, as Dr. Frankenstein, and Dwight Frye, as his assistant Fritz, prepare to bring their monster to life in a scene from the 1931 movie version of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.

PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE

action? Or is it Viktor's alter ego the modern Prometheus who suffers endless pain inflicted by his "non-biological parent"?

Given the aesthetic complicity, it is no wonder that when the book came out in 1818, many thought it to be written by Mary's husband Percy Bysshe Shelley. For the nineteenth century audience, it was difficult to credit a female author for a text that broke fresh grounds in at least three genres: science fiction, Gothic horror and the Romantic novel. The first edition of the book was published anonymously. It is in the second edition published in France in 1820, Mary Shelley included an introduction that helps us contextualise the plot.

The story was conceived in 1816 when the Shelleys were invited by Lord

Galvani's experiment with electricity earlier. The Italian scientist Luigi Galvani in 1780 ran electricity through the legs of a frog and mistakenly thought that the muscle reflexes of the dead frog were signs of life. Mary's vision is probably shaped by this innovation. The naming of the novel, on the other hand, has to do with the legend of the Frankenstein castle that she came across while crossing the Rhineland. The Von Frankenstein family had lived in the castle since the eleventh century, and it was later turned into a chapel and a hospital. An alchemist called Johann Dippel, who worked there in the 17th century, was known to have invented a supposed "elixir of life", made out of dead animals. The literal meaning of Frankenstein is "unnatural mountain":