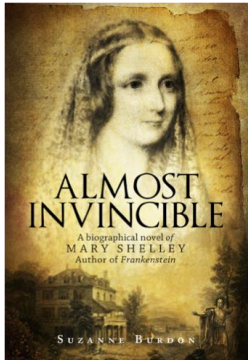


Frankenstein and Mary Shelley

Notes for students

(with reference to *Almost Invincible*)
by Suzanne Burdon

Who was Mary Shelley, author of Frankenstein?



This is how William Godwin, Mary's father, described her when she was fifteen:

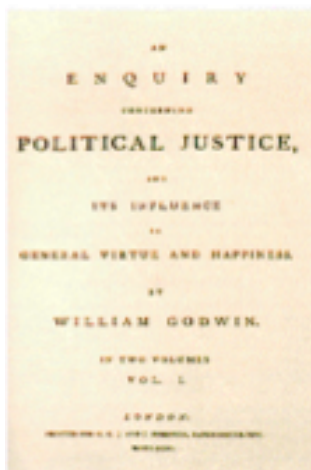
"She is singularly bold, somewhat imperious and active of mind. Her desire of knowledge is great, and her perseverance in everything she undertakes, almost invincible."

Biography: Born in 1797, daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin.



Mary Wollstonecraft was famous as author of several books including *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. She had lived as an independent woman until she married Godwin. She had already had a relationship in Paris with Gilbert Imlay, an American and had a daughter by him called Fanny. She died giving birth to Mary, her daughter.

*Would men but generously snap our chains,
and be content with rational fellowship, instead
of slavish obedience,
they would find us more observant daughters,
more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives,
more reasonable mothers - in a word, better
citizens."*



William Godwin was the author of several books on political philosophy, the most Famous being *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, a critique of the political and social systems of the day. He also wrote a novel called *Things as They Are; or The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, which is sometimes described as the first thriller. Mary was profoundly influenced by her father's ideas, and much of her education came from his extensive library.

*Whenever government assumes to deliver us
from the trouble of thinking for ourselves,
the only consequences it produces
are those of torpor and imbecility.*



Consider. How did the beliefs and political stance of Mary's parents affect the social attitudes that she incorporated into her story of *Frankenstein*?

Mary at home

Let us look at Mary at sixteen, just back in London, from a year in Scotland.

This is a snapshot of her family, at her home in Skinner Street, London. Mary's was a what we would call today, a blended family. None of the children had the same two parents.

- **William Godwin** Father of Mary and William,
- **Mary Jane Godwin** (nee Clairmont) Mary's Step-mother. Second wife of William Godwin. Married Mary's father when Mary was three.
- **Mary Wollstonecraft, 16**, Daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, deceased,
- **Fanny Imlay, 19**, Mary's half sister. Daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, deceased, and Gilbert Imlay.
- **Jane Clairmont, 16**, Mary's step-sister (who later changed her name to Claire). Daughter of Mary Jane Clairmont and a landowner called Letheridge (though her mother always told her that her father was a Swiss Gentleman).
- **Charles Clairmont, 19**, Mary's step-brother, son of Mary Jane Clairmont and a Swiss called Gaulis.
- **William Godwin, 10**, Mary's half-brother, son of William and Mary Jane Godwin.

Claire Clairmont



Consider. Did Mary's complicated childhood affect any of the themes relating to family life, in *Frankenstein*?

(Further reading: *Almost Invincible* chapter 2)



Their house in Skinner Street was the home of The Juvenile Library, run by Mrs. Godwin, which published children's stories and histories, often contributed by Godwin under a pseudonym. Mary Shelley's first literary debut is attributed to her at eleven, either writing or contributing to a comic piece called *Mounseer Nongtongpaw*. This is an adaption of a song about the Englishman, John Bull who goes to France and fails to understand the language. The Frenchman says, in answer to his questions "Monsieur, je vous n'entends pas" ("Monsieur, I don't understand you"), and John Bull continually misinterprets this to Mounseer Nongtongpaw, with many comic misunderstandings.

you"), and John Bull continually misinterprets this to Mounseer Nongtongpaw, with many comic misunderstandings.

Meeting Shelley



Percy Bysshe Shelley was twenty-one when he met Mary. She had just come back from Scotland and Shelley was a regular visitor to their household because he was trying to help Mary's father who was always in debt. Shelley tried to raise money on his future inheritance, called post-obit bonds – to finance the philosopher whose ideas and work he admired. Shelley was an emerging poet and aspired to be a political force with his poetry. Poets, he believed "are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

Shelley was already married when he met Mary. He had one child and another on the way. Nevertheless he fell deeply in love with Mary, seeing her as his soulmate. Because her parents were intellectual giants, he expected that she would be too.

Mary was equally in love with Shelley, and she agreed to be his partner. Shelley had an idealised view of relationships. He thought that his wife Harriet would understand this passion and that she would agree to live with them as their friend. Both he and Mary thought that because of the liberal views of Mary's parents that they would also sympathise with them. In fact, Mary's father was furious. He worried that the scandal would affect his own reputation. After weeks of tears and drama, Mary and Shelley eloped to war-ravaged France, early one morning. Unaccountably, they took Mary's step-sister, Jane (Claire) with them. This had consequences that led directly to the genesis of Frankenstein.

Consider. How did taking Mary's stepsister with them when they eloped impact on the circumstances that led to Mary's composition of Frankenstein?

(Further reading: Almost Invincible chapter 2 - 4)



In their 'Six Weeks Tour' of France to Switzerland, they eventually had to turn back for lack of funds, and went via a boat on the Rhine. As they went, they passed Castle Frankenstein, where rumor had it that a mad scientist, Johnathon Dippel, had used bodies in experiments.

A new way of life

When Mary and Shelley got back to London after six weeks in France and Switzerland, Mary, at seventeen suffers from separation from Shelley, when he is hiding from the debt collectors, suffers a miscarriage, and eventually gives birth to a healthy boy, called William.



Letter from Mary to Shelley, begins:

*For what a minute did I see you yesterday –
is this the way my beloved that we are to live?*



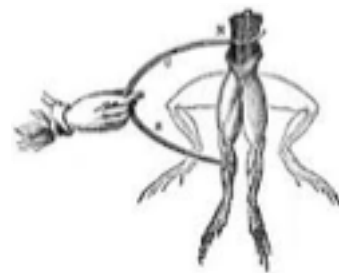
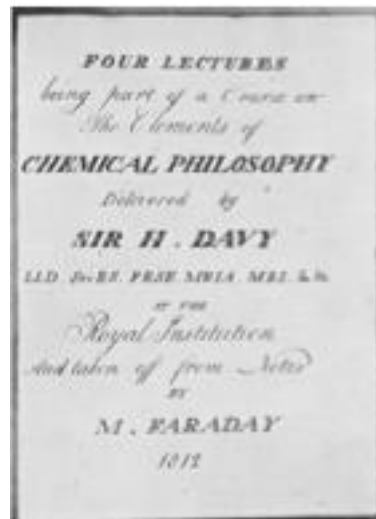
Consider: The use of the name, William, in Frankenstein. William died at young age of Typhus.

(Further reading: Almost Invincible Part 3)

Shelley and Mary's son, William

Shelley and science

When Mary became Shelley's partner she had little idea that the poet was also obsessed by science. He had been influenced by a master at Eton, James Lind who wakened a thirst for scientific knowledge, in particular with the experiments of Galvani, who caused a frog's leg to animate when an electric current was passed through it. Shelley always had scientific experiments in progress, among the books and writings of their literary efforts. Early nineteenth century London was also full of 'natural philosophers' toting the latest developments in science as magic shows, which Mary and Shelley visited. Shelley was a big fan of the work of Humphrey Davy, whose book on Chemical Philosophy was a standard part of his library, wherever they went.



Luigi Galvani 1780's - Galvanism
Giovanni Aldini – 1803 'reanimates' corpse

Shelley and Atheism

Shelley was expelled from Oxford for writing a pamphlet called *The Necessity of Atheism*. At the time, in England, to be an atheist was to be morally deficit.

In his essay he says, *"There Is No God. This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit co-eternal with the universe remains unshaken."* Shelley: *The Necessity of Atheism*

When she became Shelley's partner, Mary's attitude to religion was complicated. Her father had been a Dissenting Minister before his career as a political philosopher, and he wrote Bible stories for children for the Juvenile Library. Shelley's position was strongly against organized religion.

In fighting for his God everyone, in fact, fights only for the interests of his own vanity, which, of all the passions produced by the mal-organization of society, is the quickest to take offense, and the most capable of committing the greatest follies. Shelley: *The Necessity of Atheism*

Consider: The novel, *Frankenstein*, is often thought of as a challenge to Christianity, because a man is taking on the creationist role of God.

Jean-Jaques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a Genevan philosopher and writer of the 18th century. His political philosophy influenced the French Revolution as well as the overall development of modern political, sociological, and educational thought. His ideas on the 'natural' goodness of humanity, uncorrupted by the unnatural desires created by civilizations, were very influential among Mary and Shelly and their peers.

"The example of savages, almost all of whom have been found in this state, seems to confirm that the human race had been made to remain in it always; that this state is the veritable youth of the world; and that all the subsequent progress has been in appearance so many steps toward the perfection of the individual, and in fact toward the decay of the species." Rousseau: *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*

Consider: What is there in *Frankenstein* that reflects Rousseau's influence? Rousseau also wrote *Emile*, a treatise on education. Mary Shelley has been criticized for her portrayal of the Creature's 'instant' education.

The road to Geneva



Mary and her stepsister Jane (who by now had become Claire) had a stormy relationship. Claire was also in love with Shelley, and jealous of Mary. She was also jealous of Mary's literary talent. She decided to trump Mary by getting a poet of her own, and Lord Byron was the most famous, and notorious, of the day. Claire essentially stalked Byron, who had recently been left by his wife. She had a brief affair with him, just before he abandoned London for the continent, to avoid the scandal of his wife's accusations. Byron was happy to leave the relationship behind, he had already grown tired of Claire. However she traded on her relationship to Shelley, whose early work Byron admired, as Shelley admired Byron's, to arrange for the Shelley's to also go to Switzerland, to Geneva and to be introduced.

Byron took a house, Villa Diodati, on Lake Geneva and the Shelley party took a much smaller place very close by, and spent most of their evening at the Villa Diodati.

Consider: the influence that Claire had and the irony that her jealousy of Mary inadvertently began the process that led to *Frankenstein*.



Consider: Shelley's influence on an impressionable seventeen year old girl and the impact the startling revelations about the potential of electricity would have on her imagination.

The weather

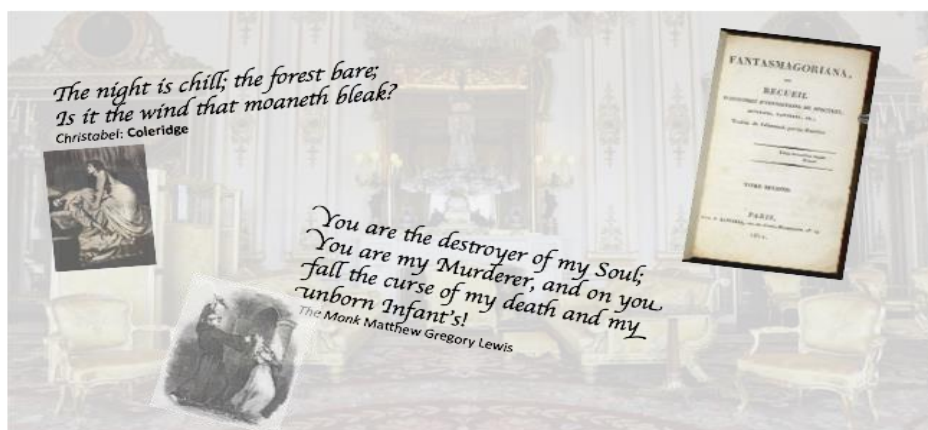
That year, 1816, was known as The Year Without a Summer. Mount Tambora in Indonesia had erupted spectacularly – it was the largest volcanic eruption in recorded history – and Europe was blanketed in dust. People thought the end of the world had come. Byron wrote a poem called *Darkness*, see an extract here.

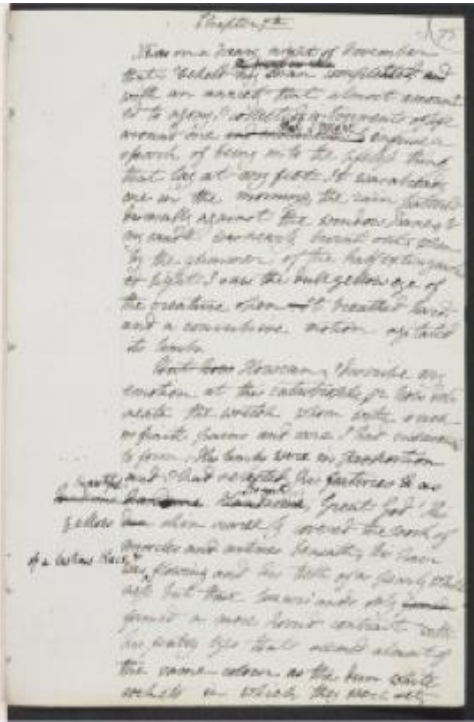
I had a dream, which was not all a dream.
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;
Morn came, and went—and came, and brought no day,
And men forgot their passions in the dread
Of this their desolation; and all hearts
Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light.

Lord Byron: *Darkness*

Ghost stories

The weather was a suitable backdrop to gothic stories and Byron, Mary and Shelley, Claire and Polidori, Byron's doctor huddled around the fire reading ghost stories, Byron threw out the challenge for each of the company, to try their hand at the creation of something frightening.





Mary's Story

As we know, Mary's story was the beginning of Frankenstein. Neither Byron nor Shelley produced anything that came to a published work, but Byron's doctor, Polidori, produced a story called *The Vampyre* which was published in 1819 - the first vampire story.

Back in England

Claire announced that she was pregnant by Byron, and Shelley and Mary took her back to England, as Byron wanted nothing more to do with her.

They took her to Bath in the west of England, a long way from London so that Claire's mother would not discover the pregnancy. It was while living in Bath the Mary finished *Frankenstein* as a novel. During this time also there was personal tragedy. Her half-sister, Fanny,

committed suicide, and Shelley's wife did too. This was a catalyst for Mary and Shelley to marry, to try and gain custody of Shelley's children. Mary's writing became her grip on sanity, as she coped with the endless crises.

Consider: What was the effect of Mary's personal circumstances on the mood of the novel?

(Further reading: *Almost Invincible* Part 4)

Publication



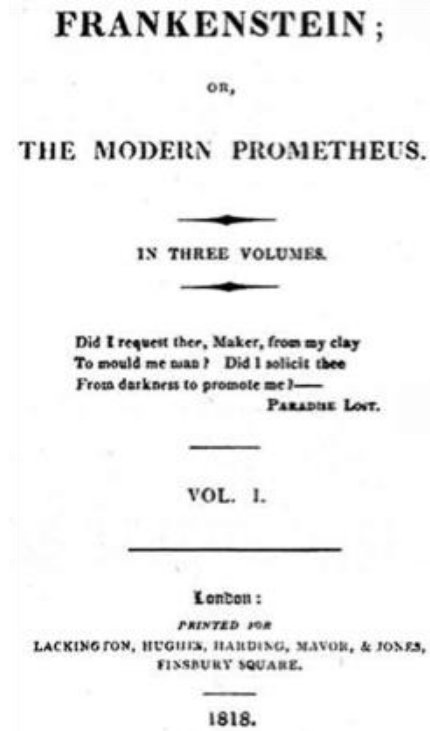
Frankenstein was finally published in 1818 in three volumes, as was usual at the time.

Shelley wrote an introduction, and Mary remained anonymous.

Shelley's and Byron's publishers refused to publish it because they were scared about the anti-religious themes.

In the end it was published by Lackington & Co. better known for their alternative publications, including the supernatural. They printed 500 copies. 459 were sold at 10/6 per three-volume set. The rest given gratis to the author and to reviewers and libraries

Mary Shelley's share was one-third of the profits, which came to £41.13.10



Reviews

Reviews were mixed, and though the writing was sometimes praised, the impiety of the themes were mostly criticised. When a whisper got out that the author was a woman it was criticised on those grounds as well. The public, however, enjoyed it.

Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine

...this extraordinary tale, in which the author seems to us to disclose

uncommon powers of poetic imagination.

Upon the whole, the work impresses us with a high idea of the author's original genius and happy power of expression



The Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany

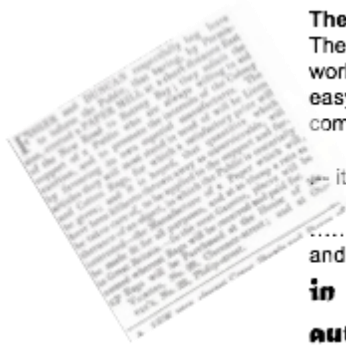
...it has an air of reality attached to it, by being connected with the favourite projects and passions of the times. .

.....there is much power and beauty,

.....some of our highest and **most reverential feelings**

receive a shock from the conception on which it turns





The Quarterly Review

The creator, terrified at his own work, flies into one wood, and the work, terrified at itself, flies into another. Here the monster, by the easy process of listening at the window of a cottage, acquires a complete education

... it inculcates no lesson of conduct, manners, or morality;

.....leaving the wearied reader, after a struggle between laughter and loathing,

in doubt whether the head or the heart of the author be the most diseased.

The British Critic

We need scarcely say, that these volumes have **neither principle, object, nor moral;** the horror which abounds in them is too grotesque and bizarre ever to approach near the sublime

The writer of it is, we understand, a female; this is an aggravation of that which is the prevailing fault of the novel; but **if our authoress can forget the gentleness of her sex,** it is no reason why we should; and we shall therefore dismiss the novel without further comment..

The Gentleman's Magazine

. THIS Tale is evidently the production of no ordinary Writer; and though we are shocked at the idea of the event on which the fiction is founded, **many parts of it are strikingly good, and the description of the scenery is excellent.**

The Belle Assemblée,.

This is a very bold fiction; and, did not the author, in a short Preface, make a kind of apology, we should almost pronounce it to be **impious**. We hope, however, the writer had the moral in view which we are desirous of drawing from it, that the presumptive works of man must be frightful, vile, and horrible; ending only in discomfort and misery to himself.

The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences,

We have heard that this work is written by Mr. Shelley; but should be disposed to attribute it to even a less experienced writer than he is. In fact we have some idea that it is the production of a **daughter of a celebrated living novelist.**

-103

Later editions

In 1823 a two volume edition was published after the success of a play based on the book called **Presumption: Or the Fate of Frankenstein**, performed to great acclaim at the English Opera. "The representation of this piece upon the stage is of astonishing, of enchanting interest.

In 1831 a third, one volume edition was published in Colburn and Bentley Standard Novel Series.