

Lecture #7 Thurs 18 Feb 2010 Case Studies: 2 Classic Novels

Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus (1818)

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (1797 – 1851) daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, early feminist, and William Godwin, political writer. Godwin was friends with many of writers and thinkers, including poets Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron.

Mary ran off with Percy at age 16. Percy's wife drowned herself in 1816 Mary and Percy married later that year. (In 1822 Percy Shelly drowned.)

In the summer of 1816 Percy & Mary stayed with Byron & other friends near Geneva. Byron challenged the group to write ghost stories. Mary (literally) dreamed up *Frankenstein* (published in 1818).

Synopsis: A long prologue (letters) by Arctic explorer, Robert Walton. Trapped in the arctic ice, he spies a monstrous human form in the distance; soon after rescues dying Victor Frankenstein, who tells his tale.

In his youth Victor reads and is enchanted by medieval alchemists and their attempt to create an elixir of life. In university he studies "modern" natural philosophy, but clings to aims of alchemists. He constructs an eight-foot-tall man and animates it. Repelled by his creation, he abandons it, and the creature disappears, only to commit horrible crimes.

Victor pursues the creature to the far north.

After telling his tale, Victor dies. The creature slips aboard Walton's ship, eulogizes Victor, promises to immolate himself at the North Pole. In our last view the creature is lost in darkness and distance.

Analysis: Can be read as the conflict between the joys of discovery/invention and the responsibility/danger of discovery.

Two points of analysis:

- similarities and differences between Walton and Frankenstein
- goals of "alchemy" (pseudoscience) vs. "chemistry" (modern science)

The opening: "You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forboding."

The framing narrative (Walton the Arctic explorer) parallels Frankenstein's narrative:

* Anticipation of discovery, followed by great danger *

(At the novel's end, Walton "learns" from Frankenstein and turns back from his quest for knowledge.)

The narrator (an explorer) is heading toward the North Pole. He is giddy with anticipation of discovery: the "cold northern breeze...fills me with delight. Do you understand this feeling?...I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and disolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight. There ... the sun is forever visible... What may not be expected in a country of eternal light?" Walton speaks of his laborious training and study, much like the rigorous formal training of a scientist, foreshadowing Victor's own efforts.

Frankenstein tells of his early passion for science (alchemy): “It was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn.” Victor blames the inflammatory mixture of the aims of the old alchemists + the tools of modern natural philosophy (science). “I had a contempt for the uses of modern natural philosophy. It was very different when the masters of the science sought immortality and power...I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth.”

This sums up paradox of modern science as limited inquiry. Despite having a limited inquiry, modern science still has power. (Victor masters chemistry.)

Victor’s inquiries into the nature of life is through analogy: “To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death.” Though much study, he discovers the secret to life. This turns out to be a bad idea!

The conclusion of the novel is ambiguous:

- the creature commits horrible crimes, but acts out of frustration and loneliness
- although Walton “turns back” (as Victor did not) there is a sense of loss and defeat

The Time Machine (1894) by H. G. Wells

Synopsis: The unnamed Time Traveler argues that Time is a dimension like length. He demonstrates a toy time machine for his audience. When his friends return a week later, the Time Traveler, looking ragged, tells them of his adventures 800,000 years in the future. The Time Traveler expected to find an advanced civilization; instead he finds humans have split into two species, the elfin, helpless Eloi and the crafty, subterranean Morlocks. The Eloi are the cattle for the Morlocks.

The Time Traveler regains his time machine from the Morlocks and travels to Earth’s far future, where he sees the Earth decay, before returning back to the present day. He presents two flowers from the future. He then vanishes back into time.

ANALYSIS: Three areas of science:

(1) theme;

(2) *argument by analogy* for Time Travel;

(3) language used in the Future, creating and discarding hypotheses.

Theme of *The Time Machine*

The opening is full of images of technology and invention. It mentions “incandescent lights,” still new in 1895 (invented in 1879) and chairs patented by the Time Traveler. By contrast, the final sentence recalls flowers given by Weena to the Time Traveller: “to witness that even when mind and strength had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness still lived in the heart of man.” This progression illustrates main theme: a warning against technological and scientific hubris. The Time Traveller “thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers.”

Explaining time travel

Argument by analogy and/or extrapolation: “There is no difference between Time and any of the other dimensions of Space..” More analogies: a series of paintings of a person at different ages, the recording strip of a barometer. The Psychologist objects to the validity of this analogy: Can’t move around in time as in space. The Time Traveller makes a counter-analogy: humans can usually move freely in only two dimensions until the invention of the aerial balloon (opens up 3rd dimension) . Thus, Time Travel is made in analogy to air travel.

“ ‘You can show black is white by argument,’ said Filby...

“ ‘But I have experimental verification,’ said the Time Traveler.”

The Time Traveler demonstrates a toy Time Machine.

Hypothesizing the future

The Time Traveller is presented with a mystery: what had happened to humanity?

Wells uses the language of science: the Time Traveller makes a series of hypotheses and discards them as contrary evidence comes up in imitation of the scientific method.

Hypothesis #1. The Time Traveller sees the Eloi as degenerate communists.

Problem: Who feeds and clothes these helpless people?

The Time Traveller spies his first Morlock. He must modify his theory.

Hypothesis #2: “At first, proceeding from the problems of our own age, it seemed clear as daylight to me that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference between the Capitalist and the Labourer, was the key to the whole problem.”

So: degenerate communism → degenerate class society

Hypothesis #3: The Morlocks are no longer the servants of the Eloi, but the Eloi are the cattle of the Morlocks.