

Reading Homework

Mary Shelley and *Frankenstein*



Portrait of Mary Shelley

Mary Shelley (1797-1851) was the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft who was the most famous feminist of her day, the author of numerous books, and an educator. Her father was William Godwin who was equally famous as a political philosopher and one of the fathers of the anarchist movement. Although her mother died shortly after her birth, Mary was raised as a freethinker and a feminist by her father and she showed an independent streak from a very early age. By the age of seventeen, she had fallen in love with family friend Percy Bysshe Shelley who was her father's benefactor as well as an important young poet. Although Shelley was married at the time, he and Mary eloped to Europe along with Mary's half-sister Clair Clairmont in the summer of 1816 to join the notorious young Lord Byron in Switzerland for a holiday which was to become legend. The summer of 1816 was famous for being the coldest that Europe had experienced since

temperatures had been recorded. Byron and his guests were forced to stay inside much of the time. To amuse his guests Byron proposed a contest during which each would write a ghost story to try to frighten the others. Neither he nor Shelley produced anything worthwhile, but Byron's doctor, John Polidori wrote a short story called *The Vampyre* which was the world's first fictional vampire story. However, first prize went to the nineteen-year-old Mary who created the story which would serve as the basis for her novel *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*. The idea for the story came to her, she would later claim, in a "waking dream". The night of the contest she was unable to sleep and became possessed by her imagination in which she "...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." Thus, was born her monster, among the most famous in all of horror.

Unlike the less successful *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* was a best seller in its day. But like *Dracula*, it became a stage play before being made into a movie. Also, like *Dracula*, the cult-like status of the story rests far more on the film that was made from the novel and play than from the original tale as told by Shelley.

Your professor was a student of literature long before he became a student of film and eventually a film historian and he remembers very well his own professor of literature sniffing at films and saying of virtually all films made from books "of course, the book is far better than the film".

This is very often *not* the case, however. Many films have been far greater than the books from which they came and many books only survive in memory because of the films made from them. *Frankenstein* is doubtless a great work of literature, but it made a far better movie than it made a book. In fact, it became one of the greatest films ever made.