



# Considering Reception: The Definition of What an Artist is Not in Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus

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CONSIDERING RECEPTION: THE DEFINITION OF WHAT AN  
ARTIST IS NOT IN *FRANKENSTEIN, OR THE MODERN  
PROMETHEUS*

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*'How can I describe my emotions at  
this catastrophe, or how delineate the  
wretch whom with such infinite pains  
and care I had endeavoured to form?'*  
(61)

Once Frankenstein has completed his creation, he becomes the first recipient of his work and he faces failure after months of hard work. This feeling, he has not anticipated. Besides, every single character the creature shall meet will see it/him as a monster, no matter how hard the creature tries not to appear monstrous. Why is it so?

Mary Shelley accepted the challenge from Lord Byron and afterwards wrote with the aim to render the story thrilling. Writing *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, she had to anticipate the reception of her text. Thus *Frankenstein* conveys seminal questions related to the reception of art. Mary Shelley's 'hideous progeny' as she calls her book, recounts the experience of reception she wanted to avoid for her text. The creative process and the rejection of the creature by Victor demonstrate how he ignored the reception of his creature. Mary Shelley's novel shows us how and why reception does not come after a work is achieved, but that it lays at the foundation of an artist's work. If reception is not considered, neither art, nor the artist can be complete. By going through the various aspects of this incompleteness, I will show how Mary Shelley defines the work of an artist, which involves the precedence of reception over creation.

In *Frankenstein*, the figure of the artist is embodied by Robert Walton and by Victor Frankenstein. The former, who dreams to become a great writer, meets Frankenstein and secretly writes his story. He constantly refers to the readers and addresses them to convince them they will love his text. Walton once failed as a writer, but listening to Frankenstein, he learns to take the recipient into account. Indeed, Frankenstein never takes his creature's potential recipients into account- not even himself, hence the

terrible experience he is to share with his own 'hideous progeny'. As a scientist, Frankenstein shares much with the artist as Henri Bergson showed in '*Creative Evolution*'. His vision of the world being free from any cultural, historical or social definition, he can come up with a new concept. In this respect, Frankenstein is a very successful artist. He follows his own convictions and manages to bring dead matter back to life even if that is beyond anyone else's conception of the world. Yet, the look of a genius cast upon the world is not enough to make an artist.

A work of art is an object. According to Plato, an artist is also a talented craftsman so that the brilliant idea he is inspired with is beautifully shaped. That is when Victor starts neglecting his artist's task. Why does Victor reject his creature? Because even if the creature is alive, it is still not achieved, '*His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath*' (61). The outside must hide the inside. The mechanism must disappear and the creature should appear to be moving as if by magic. The craftsman should render the traces of his work invisible. The process of creation must disappear behind the creation itself. That leads us to the necessity of harmony, the second reason why Frankenstein's creature appears monstrous. Victor notices:

*his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.* (61)

Victor did not think of his creature as a whole, he thought of each part independently so that the result of the composition has no unity or balance. In fact, this description of the creature as a whole sharply contrasts with the separate limbs before Victor assembles them: '*His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful.*' (61). At that point, he focuses his efforts on the outcome of his scientific concept. He leaves no distance between inspiration and craft. Aesthetic harmony, which consists in giving a unity to the achieved creation, is not his concern. Consequently, Victor appears to ignore the final physical aspect of his creature, as if the obviousness of his genius as a creator will render his creature complete and worth anyone's admiration. In

fact, Victor considers the dead limbs he picks individually and not as a future body with a unity. This can be compared with a child's vision of their body before the stage of the mirror. Besides, Victor seems to be at the stage of the imaginary since he does not realize that what is on his mind needs to be conveyed to the other. The other does not even exist at that stage for Victor. These two aspects show that he is an immature, an incomplete artist.

Walton, the writer, stands as Victor's counterexample. He makes detailed notes; he adds quotes to embellish his text; he takes time to read it again and submits it to Frankenstein's judgement at the end. On the contrary, Frankenstein stops thinking during the composition process: *'But this discovery was so great and overwhelming that all the steps by which I had been progressively led to it were obliterated, and I beheld only the result.'* (55). The labour Victor completes, just before the creature comes to life, is indeed impressive, for it is intense. Yet, owing to the vast dimension of his task, one may call Victor's work 'a slapdash job'. He is conscious of the mediocrity of his work. He realizes that he is still incapable of conceiving a being in his image: *'Although I possessed the capacity of bestowing animation, yet to prepare a frame for the reception of it, with all its intricacies of fibres, muscles, and veins, still remained a work of inconceivable difficulty and labour'* (56). Instead of persevering in the improvement of his skills in surgery, Victor skips the necessary step of aesthetic harmonisation.

*As the minuteness of the parts formed a great hinderance to my speed, I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make the being of a gigantic stature; that is to say, about eight feet in height, and proportionably large.* (56)

He acts as a child who is not yet good enough with his hands to assemble small pieces together so he uses bigger pieces. The huge size of the creature and its appearing insides and stitches is in the image of Frankenstein's immaturity as an artist.

This aesthetic neglect can be sensed in the poetics of the narrative. As soon as he discovers the principle of life and death, Victor stops his patient and intense readings. The rhythm of the narrative intensifies as Waldman kindles the enthusiasm of Victor. Later, when Frankenstein makes his own discoveries, the

sentences become longer and depict the uncontrollable flow of enthusiasm that carries Frankenstein away in a more and more rapid movement. The lexical field of restlessness contributes to this speed effect: *'the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane:-(56) 'enthusiasm; 'unremitting ardour; 'unrelaxed and breathless eagerness:-(57) 'a resistless [...] frantic impulse urged me forward; 'trance: 'unnatural stimulus': 'urged by an eagerness which perpetually increased'.*(57) Besides, Victor's journal reveals that it took him only four months to achieve his task: *'It was your journal of the four months that preceded my creation.'* (135).

Paradoxically, the 'gestation' of the titan is not half of that of a human. Victor is so impatient to admire the projection of his enormous ego that he relies on the others to improve the aesthetics of his future creations:

*I prepared myself for a multitude of reverses; my operations might be incessantly baffled, and at first my work be imperfect: yet, when I considered the improvement which every day takes place in science and mechanics, I was encouraged to hope my present attempts would at least lay the foundations of future success.*(56)

Doing so, Frankenstein refuses to elevate his skills to the height of his ambition. Therefore, he does not give life to a fully-achieved creature, but to a clumsily assembled hideous draft. Victor's creation process does not target the other, but himself only. He does not consider his creation as something that recipients will look at. He projects it as a being that will be all eyes for him.

*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* (56).

He thus views himself as a masterpiece and his creature as his perfect and sole recipient to admire him, of course.

Victor's feeling of horror at the sight of his creature reveals that his experience of creation has changed him. He evolves and thinks

twice before he completes a second creature that he destroys before it comes to life. Even if he has not become a prodigious artist, at least his experience has shown him what an artist is not. Mary Shelley was not sure if she would write a great text, but as an artist she was ready to work hard and long hours. She knew that once it was over, she could not control her art so she had to think of the recipients' reactions ahead. Her rewriting of *Frankenstein* also shows that she took time to consider and reconsider her work. Its success proves that in defining what an artist is not, she also constructed herself as a great artist.

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