



Frankenstein

Mary Shelley

the readist

Reading Guide Volume I, issue 3



*This guide is your companion through Shelley's foundational Gothic novel.
Inside: context for the 1818 text, thematic explorations, discussion prompts, and
an introduction to Lacan's mirror stage that invites you to ask what it means to
see yourself, and what happens when the image looks back in horror.*

Curated by Stacey Dowswell
Founder, The Readist

Cover art: Detail from **Maxim Vorobiev (1787–1855)**, *Oak fractured by a lightning*.

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Let's Get Started

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is one of the most over-taught and under-read novels in the English language. Everybody knows the monster. Fewer people have actually sat with the novel's real questions: about creation, responsibility, recognition, and what it costs to be refused the basic acknowledgment that you exist.

This guide uses the 1818 text — Shelley's original, before the 1831 revisions softened some of its harder edges — and pairs it with an introduction to Jacques Lacan's mirror stage. Not to prove Lacan right or to reduce the novel to a case study, but to give you a lens that makes certain things in the text suddenly, uncomfortably visible.

In this guide, you'll find historical context, major themes, discussion prompts, and a theoretical companion to help you read carefully and critically.

How to Use This Guide

- Reflect on prompts during or after reading
- Jot down responses in a notebook
- Return to key themes after finishing the book

Context for *Frankenstein*

Frankenstein is a novel about what happens when creation refuses its responsibilities. Victor Frankenstein assembles a being from stolen parts, animates it, and then, confronted with what he has made, abandons it in revulsion. Everything that follows is the consequence of that refusal.

The novel was written by a nineteen-year-old woman in Geneva in the summer of 1816, during what became known as the Year Without a Summer. The eruption of Mount Tambora the previous year had thrown enough ash into the atmosphere to cool the Northern Hemisphere, producing crop failures, famine, and a summer of unrelenting rain that kept the Villa Diodati party (the Shelleys, Lord Byron, and John Polidori) largely indoors. They read German ghost stories and challenged each other to write their own. Most of them gave up. Mary Shelley did not.

It's important to note that the scientific context here matters. Galvanism (the use of electrical current to animate dead tissue) was not science fiction in 1818. It was a subject of serious debate, and public demonstrations of galvanic experiments on animal and human corpses were not uncommon. Shelley was writing at a moment when the question of what constitutes life, and who has the right to produce it, was genuinely open. Rather than try to resolve that problem, *Frankenstein* makes it as uncomfortable as possible.

The biographical context matters too, though it requires care. Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft (author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and one of the foundational figures of feminist political thought) died eleven days after giving birth to her. Shelley grew up in the shadow of a mother she never knew, raised by a father, William Godwin (also an author and political thinker), who was both intellectually brilliant and emotionally inadequate. A novel about a creator who abandons his creation and cannot acknowledge what he has made obviously came from somewhere.

My pro tip: read the 1818 text if you can. The 1831 revision introduces a more fatalistic framing — Victor's tragedy becomes something closer to inevitable, the creature's rebellion more clearly monstrous. The 1818 version is harder and more honest: Victor's failures are choices, not fate, and the creature's case against him is almost unanswerable.

At a Glance

- Published in 1818; Shelley was 20 when she finished it
- Written during the summer of 1816 at the Villa Diodati, Lake Geneva
- The 1818 text differs significantly from the revised 1831 edition
- Part of the same wet summer that produced Polidori's *The Vampyre*
- Influenced by Shelley's reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost*
- Written in the shadow of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, who died shortly after her birth
- Galvanism — the animation of dead tissue by electricity — was a live scientific debate
- The subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*, announces a Greek mythological frame
- The novel's frame narrative (Walton's letters) creates multiple layers of unreliable narration
- Percy Shelley wrote the preface to the 1818 edition, creating authorship ambiguity
- The creature is never named — a deliberate choice with significant implications
- Shelley was part of a radical political circle; the novel's politics are not incidental
- The creature teaches himself to read using *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch, and Goethe's *Werther*

Key Themes & Discussion Prompts

Creation and Responsibility

Victor Frankenstein is not punished for making the creature; he is punished for what he does afterward. The novel is careful about this distinction. The act of creation is presented as hubristic but not inherently wrong. What is wrong — what the novel returns to obsessively — is Victor's refusal to acknowledge what he has made. Victor's horror at his own creation, his abandonment of it at the moment it first opens its yellow, watery eyes, is the original sin of the novel. Everything else is consequence.

- ▶ *At what moment does Victor's failure become irreversible? Is there a point at which he could have acted differently?*
- ▶ *The creature tells Victor: you are my creator, but I am your master. What does this inversion reveal about the relationship between creator and creation?*
- ▶ *How does the novel distinguish between the ethics of creation and the ethics of responsibility?*

Recognition and Its Refusal

The creature does not want revenge at the beginning. He wants to be seen. His encounters with the De Lacey family (whom he observes for months before attempting contact) are structured entirely around his desire for recognition. He is patient, careful, and ultimately devastated when that recognition is refused. The violence comes later, and the novel is clear about its origins: it is what happens when the demand for recognition meets a wall. There is no quote-unquote monster in this novel. This is a novel about what refusing to see someone makes them.

- ▶ *How does the creature's education — reading *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch, *Werther* — shape his understanding of what recognition would mean?*
- ▶ *What would it have cost the De Lacey family to recognize the creature? Why is that cost presented as impossible?*

- ▶ *Is the creature's eventual violence a choice, or has Victor's refusal of recognition made it inevitable?*

The Frame Narrative and Unreliable Knowledge

Frankenstein has three nested narrators: Walton, who writes letters home; Victor, who tells his story to Walton; and the creature, whose account is filtered through Victor's retelling of what Walton wrote down. By the time the creature speaks, we are four removes from anything like direct access. Shelley constructs this deliberately. The question of who is telling the truth — and whose account we are inclined to believe, and why — is a structural feature of the novel, not a flaw in it.

- ▶ *How does the frame narrative affect your sympathy toward the creature? Would the novel work differently if told in a straightforward linear form?*
- ▶ *What does Walton's own story — his ambition, his isolation, his search for glory — add to the novel's concerns?*
- ▶ *Whose account do you find more credible, Victor's or the creature's? What does your answer reveal about how you read?*

The Creature as Mirror

The creature is what Victor will not look at. He is assembled from Victor's obsessions, animated by Victor's ambition, and abandoned because Victor cannot tolerate what his own desires have produced. The novel suggests, quietly but persistently, that the creature and Victor are doubles: that the monstrosity Victor sees in the creature is a reflection of something in himself. This is the Gothic doubling that connects *Frankenstein* to the broader tradition, and it is where Lacan's mirror stage becomes most useful as a reading tool.

- ▶ *In what ways is the creature a projection of Victor's repressed desires and fears?*
- ▶ *The creature reads *Paradise Lost* and identifies with Satan rather than Adam. What does this tell us about how he understands his own position?*
- ▶ *How does the doubling of Victor and the creature complicate your moral response to each of them?*

Close-Reading Moments

"I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on."

The creature uses the word abortion, which in 1818 means something abandoned before completion. What does this self-description reveal about how he understands his own existence?

Who is he addressing in this passage, and why does the apostrophe matter?

How does this moment complicate the idea that the creature is simply monstrous?

"Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature, but I was wretched, helpless, and alone."

The creature reads Paradise Lost and finds himself in it, but in the wrong position. What does this moment of literary self-recognition reveal about how identity is formed through stories?

How does the comparison to Adam indict Victor specifically?

What does it mean that the creature's most important education comes from books rather than from human contact?

Theoretical Companion

The Mirror Stage

*Jacques Lacan, from *Ecrits* (1966)*

This text introduces one of psychoanalytic theory's most generative concepts — and one of its most unsettling. Not because it is difficult, but because once you have it, you start seeing it everywhere.

Why It's Included

Lacan's mirror stage describes a moment in early development when an infant first recognizes its own reflection. This seems like a moment of simple self-recognition. It isn't. Lacan argues that the image in the mirror is always slightly wrong compared to the infant's actual experience of its own body, which is fragmented, uncoordinated, and chaotic. The self the infant sees in the mirror is an idealized fiction. And yet the infant identifies with it. The self is constituted through a misrecognition.

This matters for *Frankenstein* because the creature's relationship to recognition is the engine of the novel. When the creature first sees his own reflection, there is no consoling misrecognition available to him. He cannot identify with what he sees because every human he has encountered has already refused to recognize it. The mirror stage, for the creature, produces not identity but its impossibility.

The goal here is not to diagnose the creature using Lacan. It is to use Lacan's framework to make visible what the novel is doing with the problem of recognition — a problem that is psychological, yes, but also social, political, and tied to questions of who gets to count as human.

Where It Comes From

The mirror stage essay was first presented as a lecture in 1936 and revised significantly before its publication in *Ecrits* in 1966. Lacan worked in dialogue with Freudian psychoanalysis, as well as phenomenology, linguistics, and structural anthropology. The essay is dense but short — readable in an evening, though it rewards multiple passes. The key concepts to hold onto are: the mirror stage itself, misrecognition (*meconnaissance*), and the distinction

between the ego (the imaginary self) and the subject (the self in language and social relation).

Occasion of Its Writing

Lacan was intervening in a debate about ego psychology (the dominant strain of psychoanalysis in postwar America and Europe, which treated the ego as a stable, unified self to be strengthened through therapy). Lacan's mirror stage essay is a direct argument against that model. The ego is not stable or unified. It is a misrecognition that we spend our lives defending. That argument has consequences well beyond clinical practice for how we understand identity, ideology, and the social processes through which some people are recognized as fully human and others are not.

From the *Ecrits*: The Mirror Stage

The following passages are drawn from Lacan's essay 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function,' as translated by Bruce Fink in *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (Norton, 2006).

"The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation — and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic — and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity."

"The function of the mirror stage turns out, in my view, to be a particular case of the function of the imago, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality — or, as they say, between the Innenwelt and the Umwelt."

"This form would have to be called the Ideal-I... it situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being of the subject"

asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as I his discordance with his own reality."

Lacan

Écrits

Jacques Lacan

Écrits

A selection

Translated by Alan Sheridan

With a foreword by Malcolm Bowie



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1

THE MIRROR STAGE AS FORMATIVE OF THE FUNCTION OF THE / AS REVEALED IN PSYCHOANALYTIC EXPERIENCE

The conception of the mirror stage that I introduced at our last congress, thirteen years ago, has since become more or less established in the practice of the French group. However, I think it worthwhile to bring it again to your attention, especially today, for the light it sheds on the formation of the *I* as we experience it in psychoanalysis. It is an experience that leads us to oppose any philosophy directly issuing from the *Cogito*.

Some of you may recall that this conception originated in a feature of human behaviour illuminated by a fact of comparative psychology. The child, at an age when he is for a time, however short, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can nevertheless already recognize as such his own image in a mirror. This recognition is indicated in the illuminative mimicry of the *Aha-Erlebnis*, which Köhler sees as the expression of situational apperception, an essential stage of the act of intelligence.

This act, far from exhausting itself, as in the case of the monkey, once the image has been mastered and found empty, immediately rebounds in the case of the child in a series of gestures in which he experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates – the child's own body, and the persons and things around him.

This event can take place, as we have known since Baldwin, from the age of six months, and its repetition has often made me reflect upon the startling spectacle of the infant in front of the mirror. Unable as yet to walk, or even to stand up, and held tightly as he is by some support, human or artificial (what, in France, we call a '*trotte-bébé*'), he nevertheless overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstructions of his support and, fixing his attitude in a slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold it in his gaze, brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image.

For me, this activity retains the meaning I have given it up to the age of eighteen months. This meaning discloses a libidinal dynamism, which has hitherto remained problematic, as well as an ontological structure of the human world that accords with my reflections on paranoiac knowledge.

We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when

he assumes an image – whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*.

This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursing dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject.

This form would have to be called the Ideal-I,¹ if we wished to incorporate it into our usual register, in the sense that it will also be the source of secondary identifications, under which term I would place the functions of libidinal normalization. But the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality.

The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as *Gestalt*, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which it appears to him above all in a contrasting size (*un relief de stature*) that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him. Thus, this *Gestalt* – whose pregnancy should be regarded as bound up with the species, though its motor style remains scarcely recognizable – by these two aspects of its appearance, symbolizes the mental permanence of the *I*, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination; it is still pregnant with the correspondences that unite the *I* with the statue in which man projects himself, with the phantoms that dominate him, or with the automaton in which, in an ambiguous relation, the world of his own making tends to find completion.

Indeed, for the *imagos* – whose veiled faces it is our privilege to see in outline in our daily experience and in the penumbra of symbolic efficacy² – the mirror-image would seem to be the threshold of the visible world, if we go by the mirror disposition that the *imago of one's own body* presents in hallucinations or dreams, whether it concerns its individual features, or even its infirmities, or its object-projections; or if we observe the role of the mirror apparatus in the appearances of the *double*, in which psychical realities, however heterogeneous, are manifested.

That a *Gestalt* should be capable of formative effects in the organism is attested by a piece of biological experimentation that is itself so alien to the idea of psychical causality that it cannot bring itself to formulate its results in these terms. It nevertheless recognizes that it is a necessary condition for the maturation of the gonad of the female pigeon that it should see another member of its species, of either sex; so sufficient in itself is this condition that the desired effect may be obtained merely by placing the individual within reach of the field of reflection of a mirror. Similarly, in the case of the migratory locust, the transition within a generation from the solitary to the gregarious form can be obtained by exposing the individual, at a certain stage, to the exclusively visual action of a similar image, provided it is animated by movements of a style sufficiently close to that characteristic of the species. Such facts are inscribed in an order of homeomorphic

identification that would itself fall within the larger question of the meaning of beauty as both formative and erogenic.

But the facts of mimicry are no less instructive when conceived as cases of heteromorphic identification, in as much as they raise the problem of the signification of space for the living organism – psychological concepts hardly seem less appropriate for shedding light on these matters than ridiculous attempts to reduce them to the supposedly supreme law of adaptation. We have only to recall how Roger Caillois (who was then very young, and still fresh from his breach with the sociological school in which he was trained) illuminated the subject by using the term '*legendary psychasthenia*' to classify morphological mimicry as an obsession with space in its derealizing effect.

I have myself shown in the social dialectic that structures human knowledge as paranoiac³ why human knowledge has greater autonomy than animal knowledge in relation to the field of force of desire, but also why human knowledge is determined in that 'little reality' (*ce peu de réalité*), which the Surrealists, in their restless way, saw as its limitation. These reflections lead me to recognize in the spatial captation manifested in the mirror-stage, even before the social dialectic, the effect in man of an organic insufficiency in his natural reality – in so far as any meaning can be given to the word 'nature'.

I am led, therefore, to regard the function of the mirror-stage as a particular case of the function of the *imago*, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality – or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*.

In man, however, this relation to nature is altered by a certain dehiscence at the heart of the organism, a primordial Discord betrayed by the signs of uneasiness and motor unco-ordination of the neo-natal months. The objective notion of the anatomical incompleteness of the pyramidal system and likewise the presence of certain humoral residues of the maternal organism confirm the view I have formulated as the fact of a real *specific prematurity of birth* in man.

It is worth noting, incidentally, that this is a fact recognized as such by embryologists, by the term *foetalization*, which determines the prevalence of the so-called superior apparatus of the neurax, and especially of the cortex, which psycho-surgical operations lead us to regard as the intra-organic mirror.

This development is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the formation of the individual into history. The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development. Thus, to break out of the circle of the *Innenwelt* into the *Umwelt* generates the inexhaustible quadrature of the ego's verifications.

This fragmented body – which term I have also introduced into our system of theoretical references – usually manifests itself in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual. It then appears in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs represented in exoscopy, growing wings and taking up arms for intestinal persecutions – the very same that the visionary Hieronymus Bosch has fixed, for all time, in painting, in their ascent from the

fifteenth century to the imaginary zenith of modern man. But this form is even tangibly revealed at the organic level, in the lines of 'fragilization' that define the anatomy of phantasy, as exhibited in the schizoid and spasmodic symptoms of hysteria.

Correlatively, the formation of the *I* is symbolized in dreams by a fortress, or a stadium – its inner arena and enclosure, surrounded by marshes and rubbish-tips, dividing it into two opposed fields of contest where the subject flounders in quest of the lofty, remote inner castle whose form (sometimes juxtaposed in the same scenario) symbolizes the id in a quite startling way. Similarly, on the mental plane, we find realized the structures of fortified works, the metaphor of which arises spontaneously, as if issuing from the symptoms themselves, to designate the mechanisms of obsessional neurosis – inversion, isolation, reduplication, cancellation and displacement.

But if we were to build on these subjective givens alone – however little we free them from the condition of experience that makes us see them as partaking of the nature of a linguistic technique – our theoretical attempts would remain exposed to the charge of projecting themselves into the unthinkable of an absolute subject. This is why I have sought in the present hypothesis, grounded in a conjunction of objective data, the guiding grid for a *method of symbolic reduction*.

It establishes in the *defences of the ego* a genetic order, in accordance with the wish formulated by Miss Anna Freud, in the first part of her great work, and situates (as against a frequently expressed prejudice) hysterical repression and its returns at a more archaic stage than obsessional inversion and its isolating processes, and the latter in turn as preliminary to paranoid alienation, which dates from the deflection of the specular *I* into the social *I*.

This moment in which the mirror-stage comes to an end inaugurates, by the identification with the *imago* of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy (so well brought out by the school of Charlotte Bühler in the phenomenon of infantile *transitivism*), the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations.

It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence by the co-operation of others, and turns the *I* into that apparatus for which every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger, even though it should correspond to a natural maturation – the very normalization of this maturation being henceforth dependent, in man, on a cultural mediation as exemplified, in the case of the sexual object, by the Oedipus complex.

In the light of this conception, the term primary narcissism, by which analytic doctrine designates the libidinal investment characteristic of that moment, reveals in those who invented it the most profound awareness of semantic latencies. But it also throws light on the dynamic opposition between this libido and the sexual libido, which the first analysts tried to define when they invoked destructive and, indeed, death instincts, in order to explain the evident connection between the narcissistic libido and the alienating function of the *I*, the aggressivity it releases in any relation to the other, even in a relation involving the most Samaritan of aid.

In fact, they were encountering that existential negativity whose reality is so vigorously proclaimed by the contemporary philosophy of being and nothingness.

But unfortunately that philosophy grasps negativity only within the limits of a self-sufficiency of consciousness, which, as one of its premises, links to the *méconnaissances*

that constitute the ego, the illusion of autonomy to which it entrusts itself. This flight of fancy, for all that it draws, to an unusual extent, on borrowings from psychoanalytic experience, culminates in the pretention of providing an existential psychoanalysis.

At the culmination of the historical effort of a society to refuse to recognize that it has any function other than the utilitarian one, and in the anxiety of the individual confronting the ‘concentrational’⁴ form of the social bond that seems to arise to crown this effort, existentialism must be judged by the explanations it gives of the subjective impasses that have indeed resulted from it; a freedom that is never more authentic than when it is within the walls of a prison; a demand for commitment, expressing the impotence of a pure consciousness to master any situation; a voyeuristic–sadistic idealization of the sexual relation; a personality that realizes itself only in suicide; a consciousness of the other than can be satisfied only by Hegelian murder.

These propositions are opposed by all our experience, in so far as it teaches us not to regard the ego as centred on the *perception–consciousness system*, or as organized by the ‘reality principle’ – a principle that is the expression of a scientific prejudice most hostile to the dialectic of knowledge. Our experience shows that we should start instead from the *function of méconnaissance* that characterizes the ego in all its structures, so markedly articulated by Miss Anna Freud. For, if the *Verneinung* represents the patent form of that function, its effects will, for the most part, remain latent, so long as they are not illuminated by some light reflected on to the level of fatality, which is where the id manifests itself.

We can thus understand the inertia characteristic of the formations of the *I*, and find there the most extensive definition of neurosis – just as the captation of the subject by the situation gives us the most general formula for madness, not only the madness that lies behind the walls of asylums, but also the madness that deafens the world with its sound and fury.

The sufferings of neurosis and psychosis are for us a schooling in the passions of the soul, just as the beam of the psychoanalytic scales, when we calculate the tilt of its threat to entire communities, provides us with an indication of the deadening of the passions in society.

At this junction of nature and culture, so persistently examined by modern anthropology, psychoanalysis alone recognizes this knot of imaginary servitude that love must always undo again, or sever.

For such a task, we place no trust in altruistic feeling, we who lay bare the aggressivity that underlies the activity of the philanthropist, the idealist, the pedagogue, and even the reformer.

In the recourse of subject to subject that we preserve, psychoanalysis may accompany the patient to the ecstatic limit of the ‘*Thou art that*’, in which is revealed to him the cipher of his mortal destiny, but it is not in our mere power as practitioners to bring him to that point where the real journey begins.

NOTES

Delivered at the 16th International Congress of Psychoanalysis, Zürich, July 17, 1949.

1 Throughout this article I leave in its peculiarity the translation I have adopted for Freud's *Ideal-Ich* [i.e., 'je-idéal'], without further comment, other than to say that I have not maintained it since.

2 Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Chapter X.

3 Cf. 'Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis', p. 8 and *Écrits*, p. 180.

4 '*Concentrationnaire*', an adjective coined after World War II (this article was written in 1949) to describe the life of the concentration-camp. In the hands of certain writers it became, by extension, applicable to many aspects of 'modern' life [Tr.].

Theoretical Discussion

Lacan's mirror stage gives us a way into *Frankenstein* that the novel's surface narrative actively resists.

On the surface, the novel is about what Victor makes and what that making costs him. But the creature's story (which takes up the novel's moral centre even when it is not in the foreground) is a story about the impossibility of self-constitution without recognition from the Other. Lacan argues that the self is not something we have prior to our social relations. It is something we become through them: through the look of the other, through the mirror image, through the name we are given or refused. The creature is given no name. He is refused the look. He has no mirror that does not confirm his exclusion.

When the creature does encounter a mirror — and there are several such moments in the novel — what he sees confirms his identity's impossibility. He sees what others see when they look at him: something that should not exist. Lacan's point is that the mirror stage is always, at some level, a misrecognition. We identify with an image that is not quite us. The creature's experience is this misrecognition at its most brutal: the image in the mirror is him, and it is exactly what the world has told him he is, and neither can be the basis for a liveable self.

Here is where the theory opens onto something larger. Lacan's mirror stage is a model of how subjectivity is formed, but it is also, extended into social life, a model of how certain subjects are constituted as less than fully human. The creature is not simply ugly. He is legible, within the novel's social world, as a thing that falls outside the category of the human. Every encounter confirms this. The question the novel asks, and that Lacan's framework helps us articulate, is whether that exclusion is natural or produced, and whether the creature is monstrous or has been made monstrous by the refusal of recognition.

Frankenstein does not answer this cleanly. It is too honest for that. But reading it through Lacan shifts where the horror sits. If there is a monster in this novel, it's not the creature. It's his misrecognition.

Reflect

- ▶ *How does Lacan's concept of misrecognition change the way you understand the creature's self-perception?*
- ▶ *Where in the novel does the creature come closest to a stable sense of self — and what destroys it?*
- ▶ *Lacan argues that the self is always constituted through the Other. What does this suggest about Victor's responsibility for who the creature becomes?*

Closing Thoughts from the Readist

Frankenstein is a novel most people think they already understand. The monster is the creature. The lesson is don't play God. The tragedy is hubris.

None of that is wrong, exactly, but it is the reading that lets you close the book comfortably, leaving a lot of potential meaning unexplored. The creature's case against Victor is almost unanswerable. He was made, abandoned, refused recognition at every turn, and then condemned for the violence that refusal produced. The novel does not excuse that violence. But it traces its origins with a precision that should be uncomfortable for anyone reading from inside the garrison of the fully-human.

Make no mistake: Lacan does not explain *Frankenstein*, nor does the mirror stage offer the ultimate reading. No theory explains a novel, and that is not what these guides are for. What Lacan gives you is a vocabulary for something the novel already knows: that the self is not a given, that recognition is not automatic, and that what we refuse to see in others reveals something about what we cannot bear to see in ourselves. Victor's horror at the creature is, among other things, a horror at what his own desires have made. That is the Gothic doubling at the centre of the novel, and it is as legible now as it was in 1818.

I started this guide series with *Brave New World*. It's a text everyone has heard of, with a theoretical companion that sharpens its contemporary relevance. I'm looking next at *Wacousta* to push into more uncomfortable territory: a novel that almost nobody reads, about a colonial anxiety that Canadian culture has never fully reckoned with. *Frankenstein* sits between those two registers. It is canonical enough to feel safe, and strange enough — once you read it carefully — to stop feeling safe almost immediately.

That movement from the familiar to the genuinely unsettling is what reading is for.

Where to from here?

What to Read Next

Looking for more fiction in this tradition? Try these on for size:

- Robert Louis Stevenson's **The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde** (1886) — the Gothic double taken to its logical conclusion
- Charlotte Bronte's **Jane Eyre** (1847) — the madwoman in the attic as the creature's structural equivalent
- Oscar Wilde's **The Picture of Dorian Gray** (1891) — the mirror as horror, beauty as corruption
- Angela Carter's **The Bloody Chamber** (1979) — the Gothic rewritten from inside its own nightmares
- Kazuo Ishiguro's **Never Let Me Go** (2005) — what it means to be made for a purpose and refused full humanity
- Octavia Butler's **Kindred** (1979) — creation, ownership, and the politics of who counts as human

Think Deeper

Want more theory to work with? Check out the following:

- Jacques Lacan, **Ecrits** (Norton, 2006) — the mirror stage essay is the place to start
- Mary Jacobus, **Reading Woman** (1986) — feminist psychoanalytic readings including *Frankenstein*
- Anne Mellor, **Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters** (1988) — the essential biographical and critical study
- Fred Botting, **Gothic** (1996) — the broader tradition the novel inaugurates
- Jessica Benjamin, **The Bonds of Love** (1988) — intersubjectivity and the ethics of recognition