

# Illusion and Reality in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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## Abstract:

One of the fundamental keys to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is the division between illusion and reality. This study aims to demonstrate these two notions and how they function in the novel. Most of the events which take place in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* are related to illusion and reality. The characters are planning for a

specific result and the structure of their plans seems to be something, but in reality, their plans become something different as they are based on illusions. Although this notion is mostly related to the protagonist of the novel, Victor Frankenstein and his creature, the Monster, it has reflected in the perception of other characters as well, like Robert Walton's journey to North Pole, people's concern over the Monster, the Monster's perception to DeLacey family, the readers' perception of Alphonse Family and Justine Moritz's idea about her sins. The analysis of this study focuses on the illusion of these characters as they believe in their truth, a seeming reality, a fabricated truth and their incapability to distinguish reality from illusion which leads to their downfall because they refuse the reality of their lives.

**Keywords:** Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, Illusion, Reality and Victor Frankenstein.

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## I. Introduction

### I.I Introduction to *Frankenstein*

*Frankenstein* is a product of a genuine English writer, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. It has three different versions 1816, 1818 and 1831. In the introduction of her last revised edition, 1831, she mentions how she started to write *Frankenstein*. On one of the rainy evenings, her husband (Percy Bysshe Shelley), Lord Byron and Byron's doctor, William Polidori, all agree to write about the most horrific story. After many attempts, she manages to give birth to one of the most frightening novels (*Frankenstein*) in the history of English literature (Schor, 2003, p.10)

Talking about Mary Shelley's masterpiece *Frankenstein* involves many philosophical notions including the conflict between people's concerns about life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If one takes eighteenth century philosophy as an intellectual movement which "stressed the application of reason and the scientific method to all aspects of life" (Spielvogel, 2009, p. 634), and also a nineteenth century artistic and intellectual movement that "rejected the emphasis on reason of the Enlightenment. Instead, Romantics stressed the importance of intuition, feeling, emotion, and imagination as the source of knowing" (Ibid, p. 638), the reader will come across the ideas of illusion and reality when they read *Frankenstein*. Although Shelley lived during the nineteenth century, there was a great impact of eighteenth-century philosophy on her. Francois Flahault (2003, p.12) explains that "In many respects, *Frankenstein* is anchored in eighteenth-century philosophy. This novel is often read in the light of ideas and intentions which contemporary interpreters have seen fit to attribute to the author, usually rational ideas and praiseworthy intentions which are approved and shared by the interpreter". On the other hand, *Frankenstein* embodies many notions of the nineteenth century including using frightening scenes as it can be detected in Victor's project for making the Monster and the emotional letters of Robert Walton to his sister Margrett Saville. Furthermore, it involves fundamental clues of nineteenth century philosophy including geocentrism, anti-social tendencies and paves the way to the Romantic model of loneliness and solidarity, creative inspiration and imagination to its high level. At the same time, Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*, shows dangerous and catastrophic inclinations driven by desire and ambition as it can be seen when Victor Frankenstein "becomes neglectful of his family and friends" (Day, 1996, p.162) and he becomes a source of misery and catastrophe for himself and his family members.

## I.II What is Illusion?

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844- 1900), as one of the well-known philosophers of the nineteenth century, claims that human beings “require art and illusion to survive” (Moyar, 2010, p.382). Nietzsche glorifies irrationality and articulates that reason, “actually played little role in human life because humans were at the mercy of irrational life forces” (Spielvogel, 2009, p.698). According to him no concept is perfect and concepts give justice to the objects that they endeavor to capture. He also states:

Reality is too harsh a state to live in, let alone to live in any fruitful or pleasant way, illusion is not only desirable but also necessary. We all need beauty. And few of us can tolerate a life of constant pain. But nor can we forever delude ourselves with illusion, however beautiful and real that illusion may seem. In other words, human beings cannot perpetually stare at the sun nor can they forever hide behind masks (Moore & Farrands, 2010, p.16)

Gabriel Vacariu (Romanian theoretical philosopher who was born in 1974 and still is alive) refers to about the greatest illusion that human beings have had which is related to our observation of this world in particular and the universe in general. According to him, we as humans are not the only creatures but there are many other living beings and articulates that the “common perception we have grown used to is that all living organisms observe or perceive more or less the same world. However, nobody has ever wondered if a planet or an electron observes (as we will see, observation is equivalent to interaction) the same unique world” (Vacariu, 2016, p. 8 & 9). So, we are not the only creatures and observers in this world and we should not place all the living and non-living things within the same category because, “[t]his world is composed of all the existent entities and their relationship, which are inevitably placed within the same spatiotemporal framework” (Ibid, p. 8).

On the other hand, J.A Cuddon argues that illusion can be defined as a “semblance of reality and verisimilitude in art which most writers seek to create in order to enable readers to think that they are seeing, feeling, hearing, tasting and smelling, or, conceivably, having some extra sensory or kinaesthetic experience” (Cuddon,2013 p. 354). It can also be stated that illusion is a wrong perception of reality or misrepresentation of the real image or event which people are experiencing in their daily life. Sometimes people experience illusion as a real thing and they create imaginative pictures in their mind and consider them as real, like those who are worshipping the idols. These idols are symbols and never good as a real thing.

Illusion as misinterpretation of the future events which previously were considered to be real continuously happens in our daily life. This concept is mostly related to the distorted views of the individuals towards their surroundings or the world in general. These kinds of people believe more in desires and emotions rather than logic and the reality of life. They are more emotional than being reasonable. Therefore, they wish that their plans become successful and lie about their personality and ability while deceiving themselves. Henry Kellerman (2014, p98) believes that the illusional people “can be persuaded by contradictory facts or by appeals to logic”. Illusional people believe they are always right and never wrong because they avoid reality and make a reality for themselves which is different from the reality of the real world as they are too obsessed with their dreams.

### **I.III What is Reality?**

To a great extent Reality is related to the real phenomenal, realistic, unfanciful world and anything which is not based on imagination. It is related to intellect, real perceptions and practical experience. Ron Niccum argues:

Reality describes the objective condition of existence. We can see it, hear it, smell it, touch it, or taste it. In other words, we can perceive it, and that means we can observe it, taste it, and assess it..... reality is absolute – no ifs, no ands, no buts, no exceptions.....it is simply IS, whether we understand the reality we perceive it or not.....reality cannot be ambiguous – that cannot be both IS and IS NOT (Niccum, 2009, p.22)

Furthermore, in literature, reality is the representation of life as it is, “not concerned with idealization, with rendering things as beautiful when they are not, or in any way presenting in any guise as they are not; nor, as a rule, is realism concerned with presenting the supranormal or transcendental” (Cuddon, p.729). There are many literary works which are based on fiction and imagination but at the same time they are realistic. Even this is true with science fiction works. For instance, J.A Cuddon states that in H.G. Wells’s novel, *The war of the Worlds*, which first serialised in 1897 by Pearson's Magazine in the UK, the events of the novel “are not realistic, though they are excellent fantasy based on reality, the writer manages to keep a beautiful and breathtaking balance on that high wire that joins both worlds” (Ibid, 590)

According to Henry James’s essay, *The Art of Fiction*, reality is one of the major characteristics in literary works especially in novels. He adds that the best from one’s true writing

which gives taste to a literary work is the air of reality and it is a supreme virtue of a novel. The criterion of reality is above all the other criteria and merits that any writer should submissively depend on. If it is not there, in other words if the work does not have reality, it means that the writer has done nothing. He writes that reality is a key of success by which the author is going to produce life and this reality competes with life by conveying the meaning and giving relief, colour and true expression for the reader (Irwin, 2016, p. 1)

One of the major points which can be linked to reality is the notion of *wish*. Many people are wishing for their futures to make their dreams true and real. But this kind of thinking is another kind of illusion and in many cases it doesn't become real; like cases in marriage which lead to divorce. The singular truth however is that perhaps gaining and yearning for wish has virtually no bearing on what happens in reality. "In reality, the wish does not exist in a vacuum. The wish is always therefore affected by circumstances, some of which, of course, can contain contaminants" (Kellerman, p.98). So, the notion of *wish* is not real and changes according to the circumstances. Additionally, *wish* is subjective not objective and leads to deception of the individuals.

## II. The Refection of Illusion and Reality in *Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley uses some literary elements in *Frankenstein* like the motifs of the characters, their viewpoints and plots for its reader so as to illustrate the notions of illusion and reality. The following are elements that show how illusion and reality are produced and function in the novel.

### II.I The Creation of Monster

Victor Frankenstein is a man of knowledge and science. He has an illusion of desiring to be the greatest and the first scientist to create a living creature. "One of the phenomena which had peculiarly attracted [his] attention was the structure of the human frame, and, indeed, any animal endowed with life" because he wants to pave "a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation" (Shelley, 1818, p. 50 & 46). Here, one can be sure that Victor endeavors to discover the secrets of life and death and his real motivation to create the monster is to go beyond science which is an illusion by itself. It is transgressive and beyond the rules of nature. Therefore, Victor's observation is illusional and not real because the reality of making or creating a living being is different from his dream. He wants to achieve glory and fame and his true ambition is the fact that everyone is indebted to him, "a new species would

bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me” (Ibid, p. 54). Actually, he is too obsessed with his dream that even time becomes unreal and illusion for him as he alludes, “six years had elapsed, passed in a dream but for one indelible trace, and I stood in the same place where I had last embraced my father before my departure for Ingolstadt” (Ibid, p. 85).

Victor’s dream leads to catastrophe because he faces reality unrealistically as he ignores his creature. His creature, the Monster, kills many members of his family including his young brother (William) and makes their housekeeper (Justine) to be executed. Victor becomes sure that his dream for being a creator is illusional and not real, “spoke my prophetic soul, as, torn by remorse, horror, and despair, I beheld those I loved spend vain sorrow upon the graves of William and Justine, the first hapless victims to my unhallowed arts” (Ibid, p.100). Then the Monster continues to destroy Victor’s dream by killing his best friend (Clerval) and his wife (Elizabeth), “the murder of Clerval, and lastly of my wife; even at that moment I knew not that my only remaining friends were safe from the malignity of the fiend” (Ibid, p. 243). Victor feels responsible for their death as he blames himself, “in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me” (Ibid, p.84). Furthermore, during his stay at the hospital, he cannot distinguish between illusion (the world which seems to be) and reality (the world which is) because he has never expected that his project leads to such misogynies, “felt languid and unable to reflect on all that had passed. The whole series of my life appeared to me as a dream; I sometimes doubted if indeed it were all true, for it never presented itself to my mind with the force of reality” (Ibid, p.219). Finally, Victor regrets his project and becomes sure that his project was illusion because in reality it led to unhappiness as he addresses Robert Walton:

Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow (Ibid, p.53).

## II.II Robert Walton’s Voyage to the North Pole

Robert Walton is an explorer and a captain of a ship. Like Victor, Walton has a dream which is not based on facts. His dream is based on his world and he does not acknowledge the outside world. Walton wants to take the journey to the north in order to discover uncharted territory and achieve greatness and fame. He wants to be the first human being to set foot there to a “land never before imprinted by the foot of man. These are my enticements” (Shelley, 1818, p.2). This desire impresses him and he tells his sister Margret Saville that he “shall satiate [his]

ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited” (Ibid, p.2). Here Walton is curious about his voyage and doesn't know that making such a journey during that time is just illusion not real. His temporal perception makes him believe in his journey and consider it as real. Then he realizes that his perceptions were an illusion, as he finds out, “I have consented to return if we are not destroyed. Thus are my hopes blasted by cowardice and indecision; I come back ignorant and disappointed. It requires more philosophy than I possess to bear this injustice with patience” (Ibid, p.267).

Additionally, Robert Walton's expectations towards his crew were illusional as well. At the beginning of the novel, he praises his crew and believes that he would fulfil his plans of the journey, “I have hired a vessel and am occupied in collecting my sailors; those whom I have already engaged appear to be men on whom I can depend and are certainly possessed of dauntless courage” (Ibid, p.7). Then when their ship is stuck into the sea, his crew start to blame him and they threaten him with mutiny, “each day of expectation delayed fills them with fear, and I almost dread a mutiny caused by this despair” (Ibid, p. 264). Finally, Walton realizes that his concerns and desires to find undiscovered lands were not real and becomes sure that he cannot be successful that is why he decides to come back, “It is past; I am returning to England. I have lost my hopes of utility and glory” (Ibid, p.267)

### **II.III The Monster**

The Monster is the name of the creature which Victor Frankenstein has made. The Monster decides to retaliate by killing all the people closest to his master. When Victor creates the Monster, he leaves him alone and doesn't teach him any principles of life. The reader sympathizes with the Monster as later on he tells his story to Victor, “I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept” (Shelley, 1818, p.119).

If the illusion of Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton is associated with their viewpoints about the future, the Monster's illusion is interwoven to his shape. When the Monster comes into life, Victor tries to escape from the Monster and refuses him because of the way that he looks, “was ugly then, but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived” (Ibid, p.60). Not only Victor, but also whoever sees the Monster chases him away because of his shape without knowing him as he mentions his story to Victor:

One of the best of these I entered, but I had hardly placed my foot within the door before the children shrieked, and one of the women fainted. The whole village was roused; some fled, some attacked me, until, grievously bruised by stones and many other kinds of missile weapons, I escaped to the open country and fearfully took refuge in a low hovel, quite bare, and making a wretched appearance after the palaces I had beheld in the village. (Ibid, p.123)

In addition to words, the rejection of the Monster can be entirely linked to his shape and appearance which is dismissive and not real. In reality, the Monster is a very good and companionable character as he helps others and only seeks to be acknowledged as a human being. In one of the incidents, the Monster helps the De Lacy family and he is admired by members of De Lacy family and their manners as he shelters near their hovel. He states, “I went into the woods and collected my own food and fuel for the cottage. When I returned, as often as it was necessary, I cleared their path from the snow and performed those offices that I had seen done by Felix” (Ibid, p. 134). Additionally, in another scene, the Monster saves a little girl from drowning in the river, but he is going to be chased away by the girl’s father because of his shape or the way that he looks:

I saved her and dragged her to shore. She was senseless, and I endeavoured by every means in my power to restore animation, when I was suddenly interrupted by the approach of a rustic, who was probably the person from whom she had playfully fled. On seeing me, he darted towards me, and tearing the girl from my arms, hastened towards the deeper parts of the wood. I followed speedily, I hardly knew why; but when the man saw me draw near, he aimed a gun, which he carried, at my body and fired. I sank to the ground, and my injurer, with increased swiftness, escaped into the wood. (Ibid, p.169)

Shape is the main issue in the Monster’s story; his shape is illusive and does not represent reality. In other words, he looks ugly but he is humanist towards people. He is not welcomed by people. No one accepts him as one of the members of their society because of his shape. So, the way that the Monster looks becomes an illusion in the perception of people. On the other hand, there is a wrong perception of the Monster towards the De Lacy family as well. The Monster already knows about his ugliness, but still waits for the mercifulness of the De Lacy family to accept him as one of the members of their family. When the Monster reveals himself to the De Lacy family, Flex (De Lacy ’s son) attacks him severely. The Monster adds “he dashed me to the



ground and struck me violently with a stick”, although the Monster claims that he “could have torn him limb from limb, as the lion rends the antelope” (Ibid, p. 161). In this case, the Monster is a very deceptive and illusionary person towards the De Lacy family because he wishes to accept him. He does not realize that they are like other human beings who he has met before. Finally, the Monster admits to this fact as Shelley writes, “I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity” (Ibid, p.161).

## II. IV Elizabeth Lavenza and Justine Moritz

At the beginning of Victor Frankenstein’s story, the reader becomes acquainted with Victor’s parents, Alphonse and Caroline. The novel shows that Victor doesn’t have a sister. Therefore, his mother is too tired and eager to give birth to a girl but she can’t do so. When Alphonse and Caroline make a journey to Italy, they adopt Elizabeth as compensation for Caroline’s grief. Shelley writes, “[t]hey were fond of the sweet orphan. Her presence had seemed a blessing to them, but it would be unfair to her to keep her in poverty and want when Providence afforded her such powerful protection. They consulted their village priest, and the result was that Elizabeth Lavenza became the inmate of my parents’ house” (Ibid, p.29). The above quote alludes to the fact that Victor’s parents are very merciful and try to rescue Elizabeth from poverty, but this kind of observation is an illusion. In reality, they have adopted Elizabeth for two reasons; the first because Caroline doesn’t have a daughter and the second one, they give Elizabeth as a gift to their son, “I have a pretty present for my Victor— tomorrow he shall have it” (Ibid, p.31). Here, Shelley deliberately tries to show the real intention of Victor’s parents that what they do in adopting her is not real but illusion because in reality they want Elizabeth for other purposes as Caroline doesn’t have a daughter and is preparing a gift to her son.

Justine Moritz’s story can also be linked to the notion of illusion and reality as well. She is one of the minor characters in *Frankenstein* and works as a servant in Alphonse’s house. When she is accused of murdering Victor’s youngest brother, William, she doesn’t defend herself at the court and admits to the crime although she is innocent. Justine’s false confession can be linked to the idea of ignorance and irrationality which are other types of illusion. During the trial, she deliberately confesses to the crime in order that she “might obtain absolution” (Ibid, p.97). The illusion which can be detected in her case is the fact that she is sacrificing herself for murdering someone (William) so as to obtain forgiveness of God from the sins that she has committed before or to restore her purity. Therefore, she is deceiving herself (by constructing an image of martyrdom in her mind) to sacrifice her life for the forgiveness of her soul.

## Conclusion

What can easily be seen in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* most of the major characters are not conscious about the reality of their lives and their actions and perceptions lead to their downfall. From the beginning of the novel illusion and reality as two major concepts will come out across its readers. Someone like Robert Walton based all his wishes and desires on illusion as he starts his journey and leads to the North Pole without caring about what happens to him and his crew. Victor Frankenstein believes that through his scientific devices, he will be well known and gain a reputation. But this estimation is illusional because in reality it becomes the source of catastrophe for himself and his family as well. Additionally, the Monster believes that both Victor and De Lacy family are the sources of happiness, but they reproach and fly from him. The Monster comes to the conclusion that what he has thought about Victor and DeLacey family was not true and his illusions towards them were not real. The same notion of illusion could be detected in the reader's perception towards the Alphonse Family when they adopt Elizabeth. They didn't adopt her because she was poor but because they needed her. Finally, there is Justine Moritz's illusion to make a false confession for obtaining absolution. The novel reveals that most of the major character's view point of the world is not realistic but illusional. The characters are incapable to distinguish between the world of appearance and the world of reality which lead to their destruction.

## خه‌پان و راستی له رۆمانی فرانکستاینی میړی شیلی

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ابه‌شی ئینگلیزی، کۆلیژی په‌روه‌ده‌ی بنه‌ره‌ت، زانکۆی راپه‌پین، رانیه، هه‌ریمی کوردستان، عێراق

### پوخته:

ئامانجی ئەم توێژینه‌وه‌یه بریتییە له نیشان‌دانی وه‌هم و راستی له رۆمانی فرانکستاینی میړی شیلی. به‌شیوه‌یه‌کی بنچینه‌یی، زۆربه‌ی ڕووداوه‌کانی میړی شیلی په‌یوه‌ندی وه‌هم و راستیه‌وه هه‌یه. کاره‌کته‌ره‌کانی ناو رۆمانه‌که کاره‌که‌ن بۆ ئامانجیکی دیاریکراو وه پیکهاته‌ی کاره‌کانیان پیده‌چیت که باش بیت، به‌لام ئەنجامی کاره‌کانیان شتیکی جیاواز ده‌بیت چونکه کاره‌کانیان له‌سه‌ر وه‌هم بنیاتنراوه. هه‌رچهنده‌ ئه‌و بیروکه‌یه په‌یوه‌ندی به‌ پال‌ه‌وانی رۆمانه‌که‌وه هه‌یه، فیکته‌ر فرانکستاین و دروستکراوه‌که‌ی، دیوه‌که، به‌لام له کاره‌کته‌ره‌کانی تری رۆمانه‌که‌ ره‌نگی داوه‌ته‌وه. وه‌کو تیروانینی رۆبیت و‌لتن بۆ گه‌شتکردن بۆ جه‌مسهری باکور، تیروانینی خه‌لکی بۆ دیوه‌که، تیروانینی دیوه‌که بۆ خیزانی دیلاسی، تیروانینی خه‌لکی بۆ خیزانی ئەلفونس و بیرکردنه‌وه‌ی جه‌ستن مۆرتز ده‌راره‌ی تاوان. ئەو لیکۆلینه‌وه زیاتر گرینگی به‌ بیروکه‌ی وه‌هم و راستی ده‌دات و ئەوه نیشان ده‌دات که زۆربه‌ی کاره‌کته‌ره‌کانی ناو رۆمانه‌که‌ بیروبو‌چونه‌کانیان له‌سه‌ر وه‌هم هه‌لچنیوه. به‌شیوه‌یه‌کی تر بلین، پشتکردن له راستی و بیرنه‌کردنه‌وه‌ی ژیرانه، باوه‌رکردن به راستی دروستکراو، وه‌هم و تیروانینی نادروست ده‌بیته‌ هۆی له‌ناو‌چونیان

**کلیه وشه‌کان:** میړی شیلی، فرانکستاین، وه‌هم، راستی و فیکته‌ر فرانکستاین.

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