Mary Shelley's novel purports to be a collection of letters and a manuscript written by Captain Robert Walton to his sister back in England, while he was engaged in an effort to reach the north pole. It recalls the remarkable rescue of Victor Frankenstein, the idealistic scientist who created a monstrous being and gave it life, and faithfully recounts the story told to Walton in his cabin by his now dying companion. Framed within this narrative is the story told by Frankenstein's creation, the monster himself. Shelley's use of direct as opposed to reported speech makes the monster's account every bit as immediate as that told by Frankenstein himself. Finally, buried within this narrative are the voices of Elizabeth Laverza and Alphonse Frankenstein, whose words are presented in the more conventional framing form of letters.

Such is Shelley's complex narrative structure. She could have chosen the much less cumbersome device of an omniscient narrator, or even told the story through the person of Frankenstein himself--possibly through a series of letters charting his psychological breakdown. But instead she chose to let Frankenstein relate his tale to the vaguely drawn and somewhat peripheral figure of Walton, who then tells it to us. All of this raises the question, why?

Peeling the onion

The multi-layered nature of the novel is perhaps best tackled by peeling each skin back to reveal the story beneath, rather like peeling an onion. This, of course, is part of our reading experience: as each story gives way to another we feel ourselves penetrating to a greater truth that we assume lies at the heart of the novel. It is a process that holds us in suspense--an essential characteristic of the Gothic genre.

The most obvious reason for Walton's presence as narrator is that it lends a sense of verisimilitude to the work. His letters prepare the reader for the shocking tale about to be related, while their form attests to their veracity. They can at times appear awkward, as in the interests of plot advancement they sometimes inform his sister of facts that she should already know (e.g. the fact that she brought him up). Such problems are also to be found in the manuscript itself, during the production of which Walton is transformed into a scribbler at the most peculiar times. This reaches pantomime absurdity during the climactic scene of the novel when he leaves his manuscript to face the creature, with the words 'I am interrupted' and returns sometime later with the exclamation `Great God! what a scene has just taken place ... hardly know whether I shall have the power to detail it ...', but of course, in the line of plot advancement, he does, exhaustively.

Such clumsiness is, however, rare, and as a figure on the periphery of the action, Walton is essential to Shelley's attempts to maintain some semblance of emotional veracity and consistency while
relating her extraordinary tale. If Frankenstein were to address the reader directly, his narrative would have to reflect his neurotic, obsessive and ultimately self-destructive personality. Such prose would need to be repetitive, fragmentary and ultimately incoherent. Through Walton, Shelley is still able to maintain Frankenstein's first person narrative, but filter it through the voice of a narrator whose distance from events gives him a calmness that lends coherence and elegance to the story. Furthermore, his presence in the narrative allows him to become a norm against which the emotional and moral behaviour of the other characters can be measured. In this sense he becomes our representative within the novel. The somewhat dry and etiolated figure of Lockwood provides the same dual function in Bronte's Wuthering Heights, filtering the passionate story of the love affair of Heathcliff and Cathy Earnshaw as related to him by the housekeeper Nelly Dean.

If a story is told to and through a character participating in the text, this character, however vaguely drawn, automatically becomes one of central importance. When it works well it adds a rich layer to the text, forcing us beyond the plot to question what is being included and excluded in the story owing to the attitudes, prejudices and tolerance of the narrator. In Lockwood's narrative, for example, he creates for himself the persona of a sophisticated and patrician country gentleman with little more than a benevolent curiosity in the affairs of the inhabitants of Wuthering Heights. Bronte, however, reveals him to be smug, arrogant and lacking emotional depth, which causes him to side with the hopelessly unreliable Nelly Dean in her condemnation of a passion that is beyond his field of experience. We, as readers, are therefore forced to question how much of what we are being told has been distorted by Lockwood's inadequacies.

In Frankenstein there is also some discrepancy between the persona that Walton creates for himself and that which is revealed to the reader. He paints the picture of himself as an independent, romantic adventurer driven on by some spirit which he cannot quite understand to conquer the north pole for the good of mankind. Yet the Walton that Shelley reveals to us through her careful prose is an obsessive, unstable, immature 28-year-old who oscillates between his Promethean dream and assurances to his sister that he will be prudent. Furthermore, he has had no sexual experience with women, his whole project seeming to derive less from his desire to act for the good of mankind than from displaced sexual energy. His constant refrain in letter two is the need for a friend, who he claims will be able to temper his ambitions, but he rejects seemingly suitable candidates such as the Master and Lieutenant on the snobbish grounds that they lack breeding and culture. What he really needs is someone with the same Promethean ambition, who will rubber-stamp his ideas; a personality that he finds with a vengeance in the figure of Frankenstein. Indeed, it is the fact that Walton and Frankenstein are soul mates (unlike Lockwood and his housekeeper) that gives rise to even greater complexities within the novel.

Deeper layers

Nelly Dean tells her story to Lockwood because she is a gossip--it's what she likes to do. Frankenstein relates his for different, more urgent reasons. Firstly, he recognises in Walton the Promethean spark which has led to his destruction and therefore recounts his history in the hope that his listener will `deduce an apt moral' and so avert a disaster (p. 30). Secondly, he wishes to elicit a promise that Walton should kill the creature in the event of his (Frankenstein's) death. Significantly, the 'truth' that we expect to find revealed at the centre of the text is relocated on the periphery, to Walton's response to the story that he hears and that we read.
The primacy of these two reasons gives meaning to some of the seemingly digressive stories that lie within the text; a text littered with the consequences of broken promises. Safie's story, for example, in which the young Felix De Lacey risks his own freedom to overturn the injustice meted out to Safie's father, not only acts as an objective lesson in selfless behaviour for Frankenstein, but it also engenders a promise of marriage; a promise which is broken, leaving the De Lacey family in a state of isolation. One of the central reasons why the creature tells his story is to end his isolation by eliciting the promise that Frankenstein should create a female companion. This is, of course, an oath which he fails to keep, thereby providing the chilling threat from the creature: 'I will be with you on your wedding night'--a threat which is kept with a vengeance.

These stories lead us towards a denouement in which Walton is faced not only with the promise demanded by Frankenstein but also that wrung from him by his crew. One he keeps, the other he ignores, the reasons for his actions present us with the ultimate vindication of the framing structure.

Framing the mirror

Walton fails to kill the creature, arguing that he is constrained by a combination of 'curiosity and compassion' (p. 219). It is a compassion that, if Shelley has been successful, is also aroused in the reader. But this is not the only reason for his failure, since we have been carefully guided by Shelley's narrative plotting towards one that is more far reaching. Throughout the novel, the creature, which significantly remains anonymous, has oscillated between being the very tangible and hideous creation of Frankenstein's laboratory and the monstrous representation of isolated male ambition. As the narrative has unfolded it has drifted progressively towards the latter; a symbol of the 'something at work' in the souls of both Walton and Frankenstein that neither of them understands (p. 21). The monster's own story demonstrates what can happen to human potential when isolated from familial and social guidance. His participation in Frankenstein's story sees him transformed into the hideous consequence of misdirected male desire. For, like Walton, Frankenstein has trouble with women; his relationships with both Elizabeth and his mother carry incestuous undertone (remember the bizarre dream in which an imagined kiss of Elizabeth is transformed into that of his mother and thence a corpse) which give a special poignancy to his inability to create a female companion. Throughout the narrative, Frankenstein's quest to create 'another' which misses out the vital female component, has been presented by Shelley as a violation of 'mother' nature.

The stories of Frankenstein and the creature become, through Shelley's art, Walton's story, and, unlike Lockwood's narrative, this really is 'Walton's story'. As their voices merge into his single narrative voice, they explore those aspects of the male psyche that have been loosely termed the 'Promethean spark'. If Frankenstein is Walton's soul mate, then they are both victims of the creature who is the consequence of their shared Promethean desire. Frankenstein's last gasp exhortation to the crew to carry on towards the pole whatever the consequences indicates that, despite the avowed purpose of his story, he never masters this aspect of his own character. Conversely, Walton's decision to honour his promise to the crew and turn the ship around demonstrates that, ironically, Frankenstein's narrative has had its desired effect, and that he has been touched by the common humanity displayed by Felix, Elizabeth, the Master, and, indeed, the creature. There is, therefore, no need to kill the creature, since it is this Promethean aspect of Walton's character that marches on to
become the first `creature' to reach the pole, making a martyr of himself on the funeral pyre of
Frankenstein.

But lessons have been learned. This points to the essential advantage of Shelley's use of frame
structure: it both gives the story a reason to be told and charts the success or otherwise of its impact
upon the listener. Despite his protestations that `I have lost my hopes of utility and glory' (p. 215) we
leave Walton on course for his sister and her children. In this capacity she forms the ultimate frame of
the novel, her situation not only implicating the reader on the periphery of the action, but also
reminding us of the domestic harmony that Walton and similarly inspired males have turned their back
upon in the pursuit of their Promethean dreams.

Erratum: Vol. 13, No. 2, p. 3

Frankenstein was first published in 1818, not 1816.

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