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# Frankenstein: The Narrative Structure And Narrative Approach

First published in 1818, Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* begins with Captain Robert Walton who encounters a man by the name of Victor Frankenstein while journeying to the North Pole. Frankenstein relates his life to Walton, who records the story and includes them in a letter to his sister. The novel explores how Frankenstein succeeds in giving life to a being of his own creation. However, the being is not the life form he imagines that it will be, but rather a grotesque creature. Rejected by Frankenstein, the Creature seeks its revenge through murder and terror. The novel employs specific narrative techniques to influence the reader's response to the text. Shelley's use of specific a narrative structure and narrative approach influences the reader's engagement to the novel and guides the reader's response to the issues within the novel, making them reflect on social and moral values within society. The framed narrative forces the reader to develop a viewpoint and the multiple narrative points of view encourages the reader become engaged in the novel by providing the reader with a number of perspectives and prompting them to question the reliability of the narrators. Both narrative techniques help the reader to compare the unreliable narrators and Shelley specifically wants the reader to reflect upon the cause of Frankenstein's brokenness and failed endeavour. She has used *Frankenstein* to criticise and warn about unchecked ambition and audacity.

Shelley has intentionally chosen the narrative structure of a framed narrative to force the reader to select a viewpoint, either from the three given, or by constructing a new, personal opinion on the story and characters. "All the framed narratives in *Frankenstein* are motivated in similar ways. Moving from the inmost framing outwards, the de Lacey story is inside the monster's narrative, which is framed by Frankenstein's, which is conveyed by Walton's, which is in the narrative apparatus of *Frankenstein*." [Allen, 41-42] Walton's "letters" to his "dear sister" are placed at the beginning and end of Shelley's narrative and act as a frame that shapes, in obvious and subtle ways, the reader's response to the course of strange events. One of the effects it has is it forces the reader to make a judgement; however, due to the intersecting contradictory accounts presented, it is not easy to judge but rather complex and complicated. Contemporaneous readers would not have been familiar with the novel being ideologically open because the idea of a text being open to ideology is postmodern. The contemporary audience would not be accustomed to the narrative structure of the novel, especially the epistolary form, because they are not practiced in literature as the contemporaneous audience would have been.

The use of multiple narrative points of view invites the reader to question the validity of the accounts, which then leads the reader to become engaged - even immersed in the story - helping Shelley achieve her purpose: to generate thought on a number of social values and moral issues. The three first-person narrative points of view provide the reader with a number of perspectives and more information about the characters, including their motivation, thoughts, and feelings. This helps the reader to question the reliability of the narrators and choose who and what to believe. The narrative point of view shifts with the narration: it begins with the letters of Walton, shifts to Frankenstein's tale, then to the creature's narration, then it switches to Frankenstein again and ends with the records of Walton. The intention of each narrative is to create some effect on the narration. The narrative of the Monster attempts to convince

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Frankenstein to 'do [his] duty towards [it]' as the 'creator' and to make a 'companion' for it 'of the same species'. Frankenstein's narrative ventures to persuade Walton to end his journey and to destroy the Monster. The narratives of the Creature and Frankenstein are tainted by the re-telling of their stories so the reader needs to question what is true. Another reason the reliability of the narrators needs to be considered are because both Frankenstein and Walton are able to edit their own stories - "Frankenstein discovered that I made notes concerning his history; he asked to see them and then himself corrected and augmented them in many places". Readers also need to be cautious when it comes to Walton's descriptions of Frankenstein; Walton is clearly heavily under the influence of Frankenstein acting "attractive and amiable", and supplies him with praise. In his letters Walton writes about how his "affection for" Frankenstein "increases every day". Thus, the reader is invited to question the validity of the accounts. Whilst the reader is encouraged by each narrator to believe his narrative, and sympathise with him and his concern, this is quite obvious, and so the reader is prompted to choose who and what they believe. They are given the freedom to select what to accept and find sympathetic, and this carries with it the responsibility to develop a personal view on the issues that the characters face. The act of being able to struggle and engage with the novel would have been unfamiliar to the contemporaneous audience, while contemporary readers would not find it unusual but most likely entertaining. However, the use of multiple unreliable narrators would be challenging to contemporary readers because they are practiced to this narrative approach.

Shelley has strategically used the specific narrative structure and narrative approach to influence the reader to compare the narrators and used Frankenstein as a vessel to criticise and warn readers against many of the values upheld during her era. Through the multiple narrative points of view the reader understands how Walton, Frankenstein and the Creature are interconnected in many ways – whether it be their isolation, ambition, desire for companionship, desire for vengeance or the Romantic values they share. There is an explicit relationship between isolation, ambition and vengeance and ultimately tragedy - what led to the development of unchecked ambition causes the resultant tragedy. After Frankenstein leaves his family and friends, who provided him with love and companionship, there was no one to hold him back from his natural tendencies towards unchecked ambitions, leading him to create the Monster, who out of revenge towards society kills all of Frankenstein's loved ones. The death of William, Justine and Elizabeth are the consequences of Frankenstein's unchecked ambition. The framed narrative through the epistolary form, by placing letters at the beginning of the narrative, creates an emotional distance to Frankenstein as readers glimpse his 'broken spirit'; he is the one who experiences a "paroxysm of grief" and who appears to be the "slave of passion". He creates life; and he shapes his own destiny. These traits of his are not portrayed positively. The effect of these are readers are influenced to reflect upon the causes of Frankenstein's broken and on his failed endeavour. Since the book was set during the Age of Enlightenment and the Romantic era, Shelley wanted contemporaneous readers to reflect upon this idea because they were living in a time of great scientific discovery and opportunity for experimentation. Contemporary readers would also be able to reflect upon Frankenstein's unchecked ambition and its consequences because living in a time of rapid technological advances brings about issues in the social and ethical perceptions and implications of scientific research.

Shelley's Frankenstein presents many issues and values to be considered by the reader. The narrative structure and narrative approach influence the reader's engagement to the novel and sway the reader's thought towards many values within society. The framed narrative forces the reader to choose a viewpoint and the use of the multiple narrative points of view prompts the

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reader to question the validity of the accounts. Both narrative techniques make the reader engaged and immersed in the novel; however, the contemporary audience would not be familiar with the use of a framed narrative and multiple unreliable narrators, while the contemporaneous audience would find the idea of a literary text being ideologically open unusual. Furthermore, both techniques make the reader compare the framed narrator, protagonist and antagonist and Shelley strategically used Frankenstein to criticise and warn the contemporaneous audience of Romantic values. Contemporary readers would also be able to understand the consequences of unchecked ambition in scientific discovery due to all the technological advances.