Frankenstein's Media Monster: Frame Narrative, Fake News, and Contemporary Media

Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*; *Or, the Modern Prometheus,* creates a shifting frame narrative that leads her audience to doubt the truth of Victor Frankenstein's tale. This narrative framework and the confusion it evokes relates to current understandings of narratives in news media. The question of truth remains extremely pertinent in a contemporary context, and some have said our fracturing relationship with the media and political figures has shaped us into a 'post-truth society.' Emphasizing the subjectivity of truth through many layers of frame narrative, *Frankenstein* connects to the current climate of distrust in media organizations, government, and authority. The unanswered question "who can we trust?" remains as important as ever. Shelley's novel highlights key similarities in the context of narration and trust, both through her use of frame narrative to obfuscate truth as well as Victor Frankenstein's obsession with antiquated scientific mythology, dividing himself from the intellectual world and empirical, fact-based science. By exploring themes of narration and reliability, knowledge procurement, and the layers of narrative frameworks in the novel, I will compare narrative strategies in *Frankenstein* to contemporary analysis of "fake news" in order to elaborate a current perspective on the rapidly changing elements of truth and trust in media and society.

Through the construction of a many-layered narrative with Victor Frankenstein as the primary storyteller, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* produces a particular relationship between the reader and the narrator, making us question whether or not we can trust the information we receive. Victor's narrative is introduced from the beginning of the novel, and this framing distinguishes him as the story's protagonist. However, as more and more information comes to

light through his recounting of the creature's story and Walton's observations at the end of the novel, the audience is forced to question whether Victor's story is entirely valid, or if it is the justifications of a dying man (Shelley 216-217). What is presented as undeniable fact through Victor's narrative becomes a question of who's story the audience chooses to believe-- Shelley's work forces the audience to frame the story through their own perspective to construct an individual understanding of the 'truth'.

Multi-layered narratives that leave audiences with different understandings of the 'truth' of a story define the connection between *Frankenstein* and contemporary media. The recent shift of the American political sphere and the election of Donald Trump is described in Bruce McComiskey's book *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* as the beginning of an era in which "language lacks any reference to facts, truths, and realities" (McComiskey 6). In this new atmosphere, the line between fact and opinion becomes blurred such the belief that "sound arguments and reasoned opinions require facts, realities, and truths" is lost, and the basis upon which rhetorical arguments are created has shattered (McComiskey 7-8). Just as Victor Frankenstein's desires to discover "the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life" were "dreams . . . undisturbed by reality" and without evidence (Shelley 69), the contemporary era of "post-truth" emphasizes "appeals to pathos that have no basis in truth or reality or reasoning" (McComiskey 30). Both narratives sacrifice evidence and fact, relying on an emotional connection to purvey meanings that leave the 'truth' open to interpretation.

According to Matthew Parfitt, a reader must distinguish between "truth" and "fact" through developing a combination of "*respect* for existing knowledge with a healthy skepticism of it" (Parfitt 5-6). That is to say what is often perceived as steadfast, unyielding fact must be

analyzed and regarded as a "current belief," or an idea that can change or adapt to new discoveries (Parfitt 5). The issue then becomes that fact is itself an opinion in the eyes of the reader, and the audience's ideas and previous understandings shape the way they perceive the 'truth' of a story. This effect is mirrored almost exactly through Robert Walton's interactions with Frankenstein, and the reader's own framing must incorporate the way in which Walton acts as Victor's audience. The reader is the audience of both Walton's retelling of Victor's tale as well as Victor's own narrative captured in Walton's notes. The audience's ability to create knowledge, to construct a basis upon which they understand *Frankenstein*, "can move forward only by building out from what [they] already know," meaning that Victor's narrative framework serves as the starting point for the audience to understand the 'truth' of the novel (Parfitt 5).

The 'truth' that the audience receives is split from the actual events described in the story by the concerns and biases of each narrator. Information passes between several characters: the letters are designed for Walton's sister, written by Walton as he attempts to record Victor's tale, often featuring quotes and characterizations of people in his life, the creature in particular (Shelley 120-121). As described in Eleanor Salotto's article "Frankenstein and Dis(re)membered Identity," Shelley uses the "diffusion of narrative voice" to "indicate that the narrative body is not whole," and that characters are "reproducing a sutured narrative" rather than a direct account of their tales (Salotto 190). Utilizing frame narrative, Shelley creates layers within the narration by "embedd[ing]. . . stories within other stories" to deliberately create doubt and frustration about Frankenstein's tale that is "several steps removed from an originating voice" (Salotto 197-198). The framework becomes deeper and deeper as stories are transmitted between

characters through shifts in the narration as other characters' views are expressed through Victor's recounts their actions from memory.

The most straightforward example of the biased narrative framework Shelley creates is the first real interaction between Victor and the creature in which they are equals. When Victor retells the creature's story in Volume 2, Victor's perspective is applied to his own progeny's story and life (Shelley 120). In this moment, the narrative has shifted once from Walton to Victor, and now Victor will be retelling the creature's tale from memory. The intertextual relationship between Victor and Walton creates a frame that allows the audience to feel empathetic toward the creature even while Victor can "barely suppress the rage that burned within [him]" at the creature's request for a female companion (Shelley 156). Events are expressed through the self-biased accounts of Victor to a Robert Walton who is too blinded by his desire for companionship to be a reliable source of unbiased information (Shelley 54-55). At this moment, the novel has already devolved into what is essentially a complex game of telephone where all truths are questionable.

The shift in narration from the first volume's events to the second creates a perplexing and frustrating story where the reader's sympathies are constantly jumping back and forth between Frankenstein and his monster. When Frankenstein realizes that he has begun to feel "what the duties of a creator towards his creature were," he "consented to listen" to the monster's story, and thus the reader consents to listen as well (Shelley 120). A new layer is formed when the audience is finally allowed to hear the monster speak for himself, but even then the story is shaped by Victor's understanding of the events, as it is Frankenstein who speaks, not the creature. Once again, the events occuring in the novel pass between several different narrators,

each with their own opinions, before reaching the reader. After Victor's recounting of the tale, Shelley emphasizes the newly formed divide between audience and narrator where the reader is given the opportunity to feel empathy for the creature while Victor is infuriated (Shelley 156).

In these layers, the reader must attempt to discern the significance of the creature's story, but is forced to take in information through Victor's own understanding. There is no definitive truth, and Shelley's audience is forced once again to put their faith in Victor Frankenstein while simultaneously realizing how the narrative framework of the novel thus far has defined him as a protagonist, solely because it is he who is telling the story. By the time some of the experiences in the novel are read, the true events of the story have been touched and changed by as many as four characters, all imposing their own conceptions and biases upon the tale. Stories are wrapped in stories, and the truth of the novel comes into question.

The defining discovery that forces readers to question Victor's tale occurs at the very end of the novel, when the frame shifts back to Robert Walton's perspective. According to Richard Dunn, Professor Emeritus at the University of Washington and researcher of Victorian era literature, the intextual relationship between the Walton and Frankenstein "demonstrates Walton's inability to evaluate his strange visitor" (Dunn 411). "The early discussion Walton and Frankenstein have about the value of friendship," punctuated by Walton's "[bitter] want of a friend," is evidence that Walton's account of Victor's tale may be biased toward him due to Walton's desire for companionship (Dunn 411; Shelley 54). Walton ends his description of Victor by posing a question to himself, asking "what a glorious creature" Victor must have been "when he is this noble and godlike in ruin" (Shelley 210). This level of reverence and Walton's own admittance that Victor's "faith" in his own tale is "almost as imposing and interesting as truth,"

allows little room for any doubt or question of Victor's motives in Walton's mind (Shelley 210). Walton even went so far as to allow Victor to "correct" and "augment" the "notes concerning his history," meaning that every 'truth' of the novel is shaped by Victor's hand (210). The very source from which the reader's knowledge and 'truth' of the novel came, Walton's record of the story, is proven here to be as unreliable as the scientific mythology that drove Victor to animate the creature in the first place.

The rifts between 'truth' and reality in *Frankenstein* highlight the ways that the very channels of knowledge become divided, demonstrated through Victor's obsession with fantastical, unproven science. Although Victor adopts new methods during his studies at Ingolstadt, he remains obsessed with myths that have no basis in fact and is driven to test the very limits of natural philosophy (Shelley 78). His discoveries in a never before mastered field are constructed by irreplicable science, his endeavor is based upon mythology, and his successes only seem to prove to him that he is closer to his goal: the creation of life (Shelley 79-80). Victor never fully describes the scientific means through which he animates the creature, and the only other human being that sees the monster is Walton, who is biased to believe Victor. Similarly, McComiskey describes our contemporary political situation as existing in a "post-truth communication landscape" where, "if a statement . . . has the desired effect, it is good," and politicians "say whatever might work in a given situation" (McComiskey 6). Thus, the structure of arguments and stories on false or unproven information ultimately ends with a desire to convince the audience of something that normally would be unbelievable.

Furthermore, Victor's early attitudes toward natural philosophy and the attitudes of the current voting population are parallel to each other in that, when one is admonished for their

beliefs, they are driven to support them even more absolutely. In the 2016 U.S. election, supporters of Donald Trump have been turned to "alt-right fake news" that they believed was the only accurate perspective on political matters; even when a story was thoroughly debunked, many continued to believe that the information was true (McComiskey 1). In a similar way, Victor's encounter with his father while he is studying outdated scientific theory, and his father's harsh words to Victor warning him to stay away from such "sad trash" only pushed Victor to delve into the content with the "greatest avidity" (Shelley 68). According to an article by *The Atlantic*, when a person is "presented with . . . unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong" they are actually quite likely to "emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before" (Beck). In this way, people are driven to believe that their opinion is fact, and when given evidence of the contrary, they simply ignore it or believe reasoning that defines that same 'evidence' as 'fake news.'

It appears that the most powerful rhetorical strategy in 'post-truth' politics is the manipulation of media to create an environment in which there is too much knowledge and too much evidence for the audience to take in. This media phenomenon is described as "information overload," which occurs when "we become inundated with a ceaseless flow of news, social media and questionable facts" (McNaughton-Cassill). American society's attention span is lessened, resulting in the ability for the U.S. body politic to be desensitized to new information and quickly move on from story to story, leading to an inability to decipher what is important from what is inessential (Kight). The rise in "fake news," a decisive form of media that presents fiction as fact and creates confusion among voting Americans, capitalizes on the fact that once a person has engaged with it, they "are unlikely to revise their initial impressions" because they

believe that their evidence is correct, “which makes false information a serious threat” (Lombardo). Fake News permeated and confused the political atmosphere, leaving many voters unsure of which sources they could trust.

The collective response to the bursting floodgates of information at our fingertips and in the palms of our hands due to information overload is the engagement in “selective exposure” and “selective retention,”; essentially, “people expose themselves to the media messages that are most familiar to them, and they retain the messages that confirm the values and attitudes they already hold (*Media & Culture* 479, 519). These attitudes are mirrored through the audience reactions to Victor Frankenstein’s narrative framework. By introducing Frankenstein and Walton first, Shelley allows her audience’s exposure and relationship to those characters to create a sympathetic atmosphere in which their perspectives become facts to the audience.

Moreover, the way that information is presented matters. In a post-truth society, it becomes the audience’s responsibility to take initiative and to educate themselves through the procurement of knowledge from many perspectives. But, even more powerful than the citizen who is educated, society needs citizens to engage in tough conversations and think critically before making up their minds. *Frankenstein* shows us the value of thinking critically and to engage meaningfully with information while also allowing space for other knowledge to inform our final thoughts on the novel. In a modern context this means observing how the ownership of a media organization, the audience of that organization, the budget of the company, and other factors ultimately influence the information they produce. Post-truth rhetoric is particularly persuasive, capitalizing on confusion created by fake news to inundate voters with too much information; we can only fight alternative facts when we have a firm understanding of how to

analyze ‘truth’ and knowledge in a multifaceted approach. Shelley’s *Frankenstein* viewed through a modern lens is the perfect tool to teach readers that information appears different when observed from multiple perspectives, and that personal biases and different understandings can shape narratives.

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