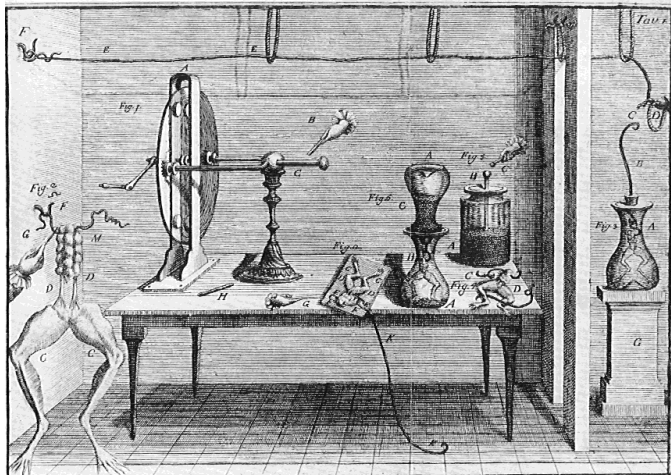


Shelley's World

Science



Science as we know it had not really been around long when Shelley was writing. Man was beginning to understand the world around him scientifically and beginning to see the influence he could have over it. But scientific advances can sometimes seem very scary when they seem to interfere with nature. It is the same today with GM foods and genetic engineering; people are scared of the unknown. In Shelley's time scientists were seen by many as going against God or even playing God or

worse still questioning the existence of God.

Politics and ideas



In the 18th century new ideas about individual human rights became important. Before that it was believed that people were born into a place in society and that's where they would stay, because that's what God decided. Now people began to believe that we are all born equal; it is how we are brought up and educated that decides the kind of people we become. Every newborn baby is a *Tabula rasa* or blank sheet.

Mary Shelley's father (William Godwin)

believed that if we took away all society's rules and regulations and institutions Man would return to his natural state of goodness. Godwin was picking up on the ideas of Rousseau (a French Philosopher). He believed that all men were essentially good. So, for him, childhood and education were the key time in life when everyone's goodness and innocence needed to be protected and nurtured.

These ideas about human rights and equality led to revolutions in France and America in the 1780s. The French Revolution ended in a period of infighting and brutal executions known as the Terror. This led many English people who supported the Revolution when it began to become disillusioned with the new ideas that started it.

Women



Mary Shelley's mother was the first feminist – Mary Wollstonecraft. So it's surprising that there are no strong women in the novel. But perhaps that's the point; if the creature had had a mother instead of a father he may have been nurtured rather than abandoned. At this time everyone was talking about the "Rights of **Man**". Shelley's mother tried to show how important a role women had to play.

Literature



Many writers and poets were inspired by these ideas. Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley's husband was a poet. He believed that humanity would only move forward and develop if people trusted their feelings and instincts rather than their reason. These Romantic poets believed that man's close relationship with nature was very important. Other writers were interested in the Gothic (horror). In these times of social change and uncertainty they wrote novels that explored extremes of human emotions.

Mary Shelley is engaging with all these ideas. You need to decide which ones you think are the most important in understanding the novel, which ones support your ideas.

Here are some things to think about:

If everyone has rights then everyone has a responsibility to respect those rights. If you take away all the old rules and beliefs will people still be the same?

Think about the rights and responsibilities of the Frankenstein and the creature.

If everyone is a "blank sheet" then it's very important that they are nurtured and cared for so that they will be able to nurture others when they are older. Is the creature born a blank sheet?

Where do the people learn to hate ugliness so much?

If you treat everyone as equal does that mean they will show you the same respect?

At first the creature only wants to be judged on his actions.

The French Revolution was inspired by ideals of equality and human rights but it led to fear and bloodshed.

The creature seems to be instinctively good; what made him violent and murderous?

Can people trust emotions and instinct?

Frankenstein is someone who is ruled by emotion and instinct; the creature commits his crimes when he gives in to his feelings.

The creature instinctively wants revenge but it only makes him more miserable. Notice that by using 3 first person narrators Shelley is able to focus on each individual's emotions up close.