

The Cost of *Frankenstein*
Life, Love, Death and Mary Shelley
By
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“Frankenstein” is the quintessential teenage book. You don't belong. You were brought into this world by people that don't care for you, and you are thrown into a world of pain and suffering and tears and hunger.

—Film Director Guillermo del Toro



The Villa Diodorati

They were just kids. It is important to remember that the group of English Romantics who gathered at the Villa Diodorati on the shores of Lake Geneva in the summer of 1816 were just kids. George Gordon, Lord Byron, was the eldest at 27; John Polidori, his personal physician, 20. Percy Bysshe Shelley was 23; Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, his lover, 18. Claire Clairmont, her stepsister, pregnant by Byron, was eight months younger.

The men would die young, two before they reached the age of 30, but all the kids would soon know this line of their fellow Romantic, John Keats: “I have been half in love with easeful Death.”

Kids often do foolish things. But that summer, one of these kids—a girl of 18—would begin work on *Frankenstein*, the story of a man creating life from death, a story that still resonates 200 years later.

Mary



Mary Shelley

Blame it on the French Revolution. That event turned the minister William Godwin (1756-1836) into a political philosopher. His 1793 book, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, became the rage in young radical thought. It imagined utopian communities in which men would lead lives of joy, having smashed institutions like government, the church and marriage. Free love based on equal rights was his watchword. But the trouble with free love has always been how much it costs.

Another proponent of free love was Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. The two met, talked, mated and created another Mary. They even got married. But 11 days after Mary's birth on September 1, 1797, Mary Wollstonecraft died of puerperal fever.

Godwin was left at 41 with a newborn and three-year-old Fanny, Mary's half-sister. When his neighbor, the widowed Mrs. Clairmont set her sights on him, he was a goner. She brought two children of her own to the ménage. (Her daughter Jane would later choose to be called Claire.) It should be noted that she wasn't really a widow. Her children were illegitimate.

Mary grew up pretty and smart, with a haphazard but thorough education founded on Godwin's library, one of the finest private collections in England. After she read, she wrote. And in the evenings, she would sit and listen to Godwin's guests, people like the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the scientist Sir Humphrey Davy and the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. She once hid under the sofa to hear Coleridge recite "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

Mary and her stepmother detested each other, so she would often seek the sanctuary of her mother's grave in St. Pancras churchyard. It was said she learned to read by tracing the letters on the headstone. Mary was born to be an English Romantic.

Philosophy not being a very lucrative profession, Mrs. Godwin had her husband open a bookselling and publishing business, but even so, Godwin was always in need of money. Enter the young Percy Shelley.

Shelley



Percy Shelley

Shelley was born August 4, 1792, the son and heir of Sir Timothy Shelley, a Sussex baronet. A brilliant child, he was bullied at Eton and sent down from Oxford in his first year after writing a pamphlet, *The Necessity of Atheism*. His political ideas were radical. That is, he believed in Parliamentary reform and suffrage expansion. And of course, free love. Inspired by Godwin's *Political Justice*, he wrote *Queen Mab*, a poem setting out a dream of peaceful revolution through the dual actions of nature and humanity (with atheism).

When Shelley realized Godwin was still alive, he wrote offering both his services and his money. This was a mistake, because Godwin believed, in the words of Miranda Seymour, "that money belonged to the man who has most need of it and that it should be taken with no sense of gratitude."

Although Shelley first met Godwin in 1812, he did not meet Mary until the early summer of 1814. She was 16; he, 21. Both were smitten. On June 26, they declared their love at her mother's grave. Legend has it they immediately consummated their passion atop the grave, while Jane stood sentinel. Only one thing stood between these two young Romantics—Shelley was already married. Harriet Shelley, 18, had already given him one child and was pregnant with another when he abandoned her, free love dictating that when one partner had ceased loving the other, he (it was usually he) would exit.

Surely Godwin would understand. These were his very principles! Unfortunately, he did not, and on the night of June 24, 1814, Shelley and Mary eloped to France. With Jane. Perhaps they thought she might serve as a chaperone, or that her French was superior. Instead, gossip ran wild with the news that the atheist pervert Shelley had absconded with not one 16-year-old, but two. Other unkind souls said Godwin had sold his daughters to Shelley for £1,500.

Both Mary and Percy had been raised in bubbles. Now, like Cunegonde and Candide, they were about to discover what life was like outside. It was pure romance, setting out to wander. They didn't know they would wander for the rest of their lives.

As they made their way across the war-torn landscape, they were surprised that the French not only cheated them at every turn but actively disliked them. Shelley, a proto-hippie, dreamed of founding a utopian community in Switzerland with Mary and Jane. He wrote Harriet and invited her to join, too. Platonically, of course. Harriet did not reply.

After six weeks, they ran out of money and came home, expecting to be greeted by a forgiving Godwin. After all, Mary was 17 and pregnant. Just a kid. Instead, he slammed the door in their faces, having first demanded money. So much for the principles of free love.

(Speaking of free love, it is virtually certain Shelley and Claire, as she now called herself, began a long-lasting sexual relationship around this time.)

Friends turned their backs, although some family members visited in secret. Mary and Claire were scarcely able to show their faces in the streets. Shelley, deep in debt, could see them only on Sundays, the one day on which the bailiffs who were seeking to throw him into debtors' prison were forbidden to work. Mary's baby was born prematurely on February 22, 1815, and died a few days later.

Then 1815 brightened. By May, Shelley had made financial peace with his father. Mary was pregnant again. (She would give birth to William early in 1816.) And Claire now realized she needed a better life than that of a hanger-on stepsister. Mary had bagged a poet/nobleman. Why shouldn't Claire do her one better? Her target was a complete stranger, Lord Byron.

Byron



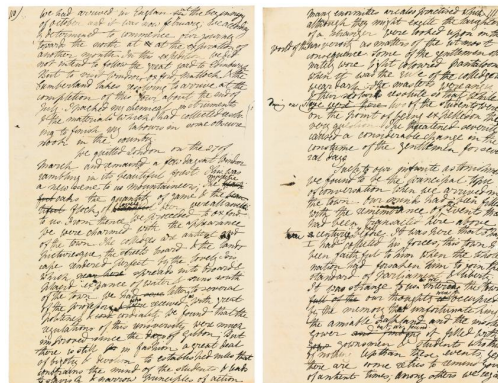
Lord Byron

Born January 22, 1788, Byron once had a lover label him “mad, bad and dangerous to know.” A baron from the age of ten, he was accustomed to getting what he wanted. He was also a poet of genius. The first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, published in 1812, established that. The next year, he took up with his half-sister, perhaps fathering her child. His 1815 marriage produced his only legitimate offspring, Ada Lovelace, the Mother of Computer Programming. His wife left him a year later.

Claire sent Byron a letter in the spring of 1816 “in which she offered herself to him fully and freely,” as Daisy Hay puts it. Byron had no objection to passing the time with a lover nine years his junior before he departed for a summer in Switzerland.

Claire then inveigled Shelley and Mary into doing likewise by promising an introduction to Byron, whom Shelley had never met. (Byron might also help with his recurring monetary woes.) Byron had no idea they were coming, but fortunately, the two poets hit it off. As for Claire, Byron reasoned she had come 800 miles, and “if a girl of 18 comes prancing to you at all hours—there is but one way.” Only Claire knew she was already pregnant.

Summer 1816



“Frankenstein” Manuscript

The 1815 explosion of Mt. Tambora in what is now Indonesia filled the atmosphere with volcanic dust, cutting off sunlight. “The Year Without a Summer” kept those who gathered at the Villa Diodati inside more than they had anticipated, which led to the writing of *Frankenstein*. Exactly how this happened is still not quite clear. Mary invented a wonderful creation myth in her preface to the 1831 edition of the novel, but her purpose was to sell books.

It is certain Byron presided over an evening’s reading of ghost stories, and that it was proposed that everyone write one. Byron and Shelley soon abandoned their attempts. Mary said her idea came to her in a dream, but this has the ring of imitation Coleridge.

The talk that summer was of the principle of life. The muscles of corpses had been made to contract by the application of electricity. Could this be the means by which life could be produced by man in a being assembled from human parts? How Mary dealt with these questions is what led Brian W. Aldiss to call *Frankenstein* the first modern science fiction story. It relied neither on gods nor magic, but instead asked the question, “Given the science we know, what might be possible?”

Many fictional retellings have the novel pouring out as if Mary were Jack Kerouac. Instead, she appears to have written for only a few days, then put the work aside until mid-September. There were constant discussions with Shelley, who would edit the

manuscript. But Mary alone would write it, saying, “I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling, to my husband...”

By late August, everyone knew about Claire’s pregnancy. Arrangements were made to bring the child to Byron, and the Shelley party returned to England. They went to Bath, hoping to protect Claire’s reputation. There, Mary began to write, finishing the first four chapters in the weeks after her half-sister Fanny killed herself in October; she was 22. In mid-December, Harriet Shelley drowned herself; she was 21. Just kids...

Two weeks later, with all forgiven, the Shelleys dined at the Godwins. On December 30, they were married. Claire’s Allegra was born in January 1817. Mary’s Clara came in September.

Frankenstein was finished in May 1817, nine months (aptly) after Mary had first begun. Shelley found a publisher, and the book was published anonymously in January 1818. It was dedicated to William Godwin and had a preface by “Marlow,” Shelley’s pseudonym. Sir Walter Scott wrote a favorable review in which he credited the book to Shelley. Mary wrote a charming letter disabusing him of that notion, but it persisted.

In March, the Shelley household—three adults and three babies—set out for Italy to deliver Allegra to Byron. Four of them would never return.

Aftermath



Claire Clairmont

They went to Italy for life and instead found death: Clara (1818), William (1819), Dr. Polidori (1821), Allegra (1822)—and Shelley, drowned in a boating accident in July 1822. Mary had one more child, Percy Florence, in 1819, before a miscarriage a month before Shelley’s death almost killed her, too. Claire left to become a governess. She would outlive everyone, dying in 1879. (Byron would die of a fever in Greece in 1824.)

Mary returned to England in 1823, a destitute 25-year-old widow with three dead children and a young son. In another society, she might still have been just a kid. In Georgian England, she was not only a whore, but supposed friends slandered her as a free lover who had become a cold wife. She never remarried.

In London, Mary found a version of *Frankenstein* onstage. It was a hit, but copyright laws didn't exist, so she got nothing except fame. The publicity led her father to publish an 1823 edition naming Mary as the author. Her 1831 revision is the standard text today.

Mary would spend the rest of her life earning a living with her pen, constantly struggling with Sir Timothy Shelley (who refused to meet her) to provide for his grandson. The bitter Sir Tim would not die until 1844.

The great objective of Mary's later years was to establish Shelley's posthumous reputation not only as one of England's greatest lyric poets, but as a being composed far more of air than earth. If this meant rewriting the lives they had led when they were just kids, true to the ideals of free love for which she had paid so dearly, so be it. Mary died of a brain tumor in 1850, aged 53.

In 2019, the BBC named *Frankenstein*—a novel written by a 19-year-old girl, just a kid—one of the 100 novels that shaped our world.