

Embedded Stories in *Frankenstein*: the Delay of Gratification

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First published in 1818, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* narrates the horror tale of Victor Frankenstein and the creature he has brought to life. Through the narration of a number of characters' stories, the reader is dragged into the tale, while experiencing a noteworthy narrative mode. In this book we see what could be called a "broken narrative": starting with letters, moving to a journal, and then to what seems to be a straight first-person narration, always intertwined with dialogues, other letters, and even some poems. Narrations of past and present events mingle as the narrator constructs an interplay between oral and written languages. Moreover, the story is mediated through the narrative frame: the embedded stories contained in this tale are separated from the reader by other characters' narration—except in Robert Walton's case. I will investigate here the possible effects of the embedded stories on the creation of expectations in the reader, by analyzing the voice of the narrator in *Frankenstein*. For this purpose, due to the complex narrative structure of the book, I will base my investigation on Gérard Genette's work on narrative discourse—in the book *Narrative Discourse*—as a tool for better understanding this specific narrative.

As the readers meet the narrative discourse, they re-create in their minds the story being told. However, the logic of this narrative representation is not always easily recognizable, since it can represent the world differently from what Jonathan Culler calls a "model of the real world". In Culler's words, "[a]ccording to this model, events necessarily take place both in a particular order and a definable number of times" (qtd. in Genette 12). Based on this premise, and knowing this "model of the real world" is just one of the many ways to develop a narrative, Genette, in the

book *Narrative Discourse*, develops a set of categories for the description of narrative representations.

Genette's work opens room for the understanding of narratives that set aside the "real world" model. Because of this aperture to diversified narrative modes, as mentioned before, Genette's work will be a practical tool for the analysis of the narrator's voice in *Frankenstein*. In order to clarify the terms used in this analysis, here are some definitions of Genette's main categories. Based on the previous work of Todorov, Genette proposes three classes to designate fields of study of narrative discourse: tense, mood, and voice. First of all it is important to highlight the use of the words *story* and *narrative*. Genette "propose[s] (...) to use the word *story* for the signified or narrative content (...), [and] to use the word *narrative* for the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself"(27).

With these terms in mind, the first of Genette's categories is that of *tense* which explores the temporal relations between narrative and story.¹ These relations can be classified in terms of order (events in the story occur in one order, but are narrated in another), frequency (events that happened only once are narrated more times, or vice versa), and duration (the speed and rhythm of the event are increased or decreased in the narrative). The second category is *mood*, which relates to focalization—whose point of view orients the narrative perspective. The focalization can be either internal (when a given character's perspective orients the narrative), or external (when the perspective is that of the third person narrator). The third category is *voice*, relating to who narrates the story. The narration can be intradiegetic (when the narrator is a character), or extradiegetic (when the narrator does not belong in the fictional world). These three categories

¹ This summary of Genette's main categories is not followed by full references due to the organization of his book—these concepts are spread throughout the book, not only in specific pages.

suggested by Genette interact throughout the literary text, and in this essay will be used to problematize the relation between the many stories narrated.

The first point to be clarified is about the voice in the book. At first it might seem a little complicated because of the different voices telling their stories: we see Walton's voice in his letters and journals, then we move on to Frankenstein's voice as he tells his story, and later on to the creature's voice. However, throughout the entire book what we have is Walton's account of the stories he heard from Frankenstein: "I resolved every night [...] to record, as nearly as possible in his own words, what he has related during the day" (79). That is why, even though the narration seems to escape from him at times, the voice we "hear" is Walton's intradiegetic narration. Even if we take into consideration the fact that Frankenstein revised and improved Walton's writings—"Frankenstein discovered that I made notes concerning his history; he asked to see them and then himself corrected and augmented them in many places"(253)—Frankenstein's participation is that of an editor, not the "writer" himself. Once having defined who the narrator is I move on to what might bring a bit of a trouble: the mood category.

The different stories are told through Walton's voice, but not always through his point-of-view. Here Genette's classification helps to understand the difference between who is the narrator (*voice*), and who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective (*mood*—focalization). The internal focalization is somehow problematic: it is certainly variable, but it gets complicated due to the embedded stories. At first we have Walton's point of view (in his letters to his sister, and the entries of his journal); inside of Walton's focalization we have Frankenstein's point-of-view (as he tells his tale to Walton); and inside of Frankenstein's focalization we have the creature's point-of-view (when he tells his story to Frankenstein, who tells the creature's story to Walton, who tells their story to his sister). So far it could be categorized as a case of variable internal focalization, when different characters share the

focalization of the story. However, at instances it seems to be a case of not only “variable”, but also “multiple” internal focalization, that is, different characters focalize the same event. For instance, in the final dialogue between the creature and Walton, we see Frankenstein’s story through the creature’s point-of-view, when the creature states: “You [...] seem to have a knowledge of my crimes and [Frankenstein’s] misfortunes. But in the detail which he gave you of them he could not sum up the hours and months of misery which I endured wasting in impotent passions” (Shelley 263). This mix in the focalization creates many “levels” that separate the stories from the reader.

In these levels between the reader and the character who participates in the action, we have Frankenstein separated by one step (Walton), and the creature separated by two steps at first (Walton and Frankenstein), but only one step at the end of the book (when Walton meets him). These levels might help to focus on an important aspect when we deal with horror stories: Is the reader provided with tools for entering the fiction world for a story that is frightful enough? Mary Shelley, in *Frankenstein*, makes use of a number of techniques in order to make the story “believable”, and thus frightening.

These techniques are used to gain the readers “trust”. First of all, the letters written by Walton in the beginning, and by Elizabeth and Frankenstein’s father during Frankenstein’s narrative, give the book an epistolary quality. According to Mark Macbeth, “With the epistolary novel, Shelley develops a reader who is simultaneously internal and external to the narrative: this ultimately insures reader involvement” (MacBeth 143): the reader has the impression that the letters are being addressed to him/her thus being dragged into the fictional world. According to Patricia A. Rosenmeyer “Epistolary technique always problematizes the boundaries between fiction and reality” (4), thus being a strong device in making the readers believe the tale. Moreover Frankenstein himself warns Walton (and the reader) about the apparent “marvelous”

characteristic of his story: “Prepare to hear of occurrences which are usually deemed marvelous” (79). The creature also compels the reader to read this as if it were true, for it will raise stronger sensations “I read it, as I had read the other volumes which had fallen in my hands, as a true history” (175). So here we have many hints and even other stories to convince the reader, and raise fear.

Another instance that deserves some attention here is the fact of a first person narrator not being omniscient. Maybe the first person narrator, not showing other character’s subjectivity, would contribute for the reader to observe one specific perspective: the narrator’s (for his own subjectivity is shown and helps to cause sympathy). However, this is not the case in *Frankenstein*. In Shelley’s book, the restricted internal focalization which shows different characters’ points-of-view, combined with subjectivity, induces the reader to understand the “human” characteristic that is present in the character that focalizes each particular story. Even the creature, after all the evil he caused, can raise some sympathy in the reader, through his point-of-view and his internal motivations.

Another category discussed by Genette that plays an important part is *tense*. The story is completely in the past, since we learn it from Walton’s journals and letters. But we have some anachrony that goes beyond the past feature. Frankenstein many times inserts what Genette calls “prolepses on analepses”, which are recalls of past plans, or an anticipation of the future, but that occurred in the past (79). Furthermore in the stories of other characters, such as Elizabeth, Frankenstein’s father, Justine, Felix’s family, we usually see a summary. One more important detail in the story’s frequency are the pauses. Not only descriptive pauses, but also “moralizing” pauses. Since this can be seen as a “moral tale”, Frankenstein pauses the narrative repeatedly to “moralize”: he tells his story as a lesson to be learned.

As mentioned earlier the book presents a number of other stories brought up by the three main aforementioned characters—Walton, Frankenstein, and the creature. The embedded stories delay gratification and accumulate the readers' expectation, exacerbating the desire for knowing the end, not only of the first story, but of all of them. One of the reasons for the use of this technique might be as a resource to intensify the reader's anxiety. Moreover, although the reader may not be aware of this, all stories relate to Frankenstein's tale. For instance in his mother's death, we have an anticipation of Frankenstein's feelings when, later on, the creature kills his beloved and family: "we must continue our course with the rest and learn to think ourselves fortunate whilst one remains whom the spoiler has not seized" (92).

To sum up, the story is mediated through the narrative frame, and we have some significant implications for this. Nevertheless, the major one might still be the embedded stories making Frankenstein's tale more trustworthy, since the other people involved (like Walton himself) corroborate Frankenstein's tale, serving as eye-witnesses. More than only Frankenstein's voice, we have the tale told as a testimony, and with other witnesses (like Felix's family, Clerval, who saw Frankenstein's consumption, and all the people who were killed by the creature) who face the creature themselves. Mary Shelley achieved a memorable horror tale not only for her imagination in coming up with such a story, but for her mastery in telling it in means that would scare even the most skeptic of the readers. In *Frankenstein*, the horror lies not only in the content of the tale, it also lies in the form chosen by the teller.

Works Cited

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