

Nineteenth-Century British Novel

Engl 153B (Spring 2006)

Dr. Katherine D. Harris

Synopsis of Novels

***Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley (1818)**

Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus is the most famous novel by Mary Shelley, wife of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. It has done considerable damage thanks to its innovation and its author's audacity in confronting issues of such a controversial nature as artificially creating life in the early nineteenth century. The novel was immediately enormously successful, spawning a stage production that made Frankenstein's creation - the so-called 'monster' - mute for the first but not only time. The novel was published initially in 1818 although later versions exist in which the author succumbed to pressures to tone down certain elements. This is the more polished 1831 edition, which is the most common edition of the text. The original is a masterpiece of Gothic literature however. It is narrated by an explorer, Walton, who writes the story in letters home. However, the bulk of the story is told by Victor Frankenstein who narrates his own creation of a man from bones he has stolen and with the power of electricity. In the center of the concentric circles of narrative is the creature himself, by far the most sympathetic of the narrators, who is forced by an unsympathetic world to acts of violence and cruelty and finally the murder of Frankenstein's wife when the 'father' refuses to create a companion for the creature. The novel's settings of Swiss mountains and Arctic desolation are perfect for Mary Shelley's tale that was originally conceived abroad in the wet summer of 1816 with Byron and her husband in a night telling ghost stories. None of the narrators are wholly to be trusted or liked, but each learns from the others and their mental torment is mimicked in the 'sublime' or rugged and vast landscapes Shelley describes so vividly. Film adaptations and bowdlerized versions have reduced Frankenstein's creation to a ludicrous monster and in a sense the world has reacted to the creature in precisely the way the author predicted. We look away in horror.

***Old Curiosity Shop* by Charles Dickens (1840)**

The *Old Curiosity Shop* was published in full as a separate volume in 1841 but was originally supposed to be part of the *Master Humphrey's Clock* series and is indeed narrated at the start by Master Humphreys. A curiosity shop was, in Dickens' time, a place where one could buy second hand goods of a precious, ornamental or antique variety. Little Nell Trent looks after her grandfather in the gloomy environs of such a shop and she is one of many Dickens heroines to be utterly devoted and kind. Their fortunes go sharply downhill as the grandfather's money is wasted by a spendthrift son-in-law and Fred Trent, Nell's brother. In this unfortunate situation, the grandfather borrows money from the appalling Daniel Quilp, an unpleasant-looking dwarf. He attempts to gamble it into a larger sum for Nell's sake but fails and Quilp, realizing where his money has gone, seizes the shop. This leaves the old man and Nell to flee and face the torments of life wandering the country to avoid the vengeful and malicious Quilp. There is something of an improvement in their fortunes, but eventually both die, in Nell's case in a particularly sentimental way that Dickens is often criticized for. There is also some justice however, for Quilp, and the minor characters such as Kit Nubbles (who adores Nell) provide some relief from the grimness of the novel's portrait of the world.

***Aurora Leigh* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1856)**

This blank-verse poem--longer than *Paradise Lost* at nearly eleven thousand lines--constitutes a new genre, for it is simultaneously an epic and a novel. The poem intertwines the stories of three major characters: the heroine, Aurora Leigh; her cousin Romney Leigh, who loves her; and a working-class woman named Marian Erle, whom Romney tries to rescue. Orphaned at puberty by the death of her English father, her Italian mother having died earlier, Aurora is sent from Italy to England to be raised by her strict, conventional aunt. Aurora satirizes the narrow "feminine" education mandated by her aunt, surreptitiously educates herself among her father's books, and dreams of becoming a great poet, a goal Romney declares impossible for a woman. Rejecting Romney's proposal of marriage and liberated by her aunt's death, Aurora supports herself through journalism and wins popularity as a poet. Romney, meanwhile, proposes to Marian, a seamstress, hoping to save her from poverty and make her a partner in his philanthropic endeavors, the role he had envisioned for Aurora. Lady Waldemar, a wealthy aristocrat who wants Romney for herself, involves Aurora in Marian's life and eventually--perhaps unknowingly--facilitates Marian's abduction to a French brothel, which leaves Romney waiting at the altar. Aurora, sick of her poetry's superficiality (and suppressing her unacknowledged love for Romney), abandons London. She coincidentally discovers Marian--now a mother--in Paris. Marian's story of being drugged, raped, and reviled as a fallen woman teaches Aurora to shed her piously conventional assumptions about sexual purity, and she establishes a home in Italy with Marian and her infant son. When Romney seeks them out, he feels morally obligated to marry Marian,

but she refuses. He too has been stripped of naive assumptions, having failed in his philanthropic efforts to aid the poor. Blinded in a fire that destroyed the ancestral home he tried to turn into a utopian community, he has gained insight into both the limits of his socialist vision and the value of Aurora's poetry. The poem concludes with the engagement of Aurora and Romney and the prophecy that through her poetry she may effect social reforms that he has failed to accomplish.

***Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins (1860)**

The Woman in White, a novel by Wilkie Collins, is a mystery narrated by draughtsman and artist Walter Hartwright and various other characters within the tale: most of whom are potentially questionable in what they say. The story begins with Walter's late night meeting of the titular woman dressed in white who he rescues from a group of pursuers. Walter goes to work in the service of the selfish and unpleasant Mr Fairlie as a drawing instructor and in doing so meets his niece Laura who strongly resembles the mysterious woman in white. Walter falls in love with Laura, but naturally there is a hitch. Laura does love Walter but is engaged to Sir Percival Glyde. Deceit, love and various unmaskings ensue that explain the strange confinement within an asylum of Anne Catherick. Tense adventures, villainy and gloriously fitting retributions are Collins' remedies.

***Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1865)**

Lewis Carroll is best remembered for this story, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel, *Through the Looking Glass*, both of which are children's books with content and style that have often appealed as much to adult readers as to the young. It was published in 1865 and was in fact with a particular child in mind, Alice Liddell, and had the working title "Alice's Adventures Under Ground". As befits that title, the tale is indeed of a trip (with the additional psychedelic sense certainly intact for the modern reader) beneath normal existence. Alice follows a certain White Rabbit down from the riverside in a dream. This alternate reality follows its own internal logic and is therefore not merely an excuse for fantasy. This logic is played out by now well-known characters such as the Mad Hatter, the Queen of Hearts, the Mock Turtle, the Cheshire Cat and the March Hare whose tea parties and games have taken their place in the folklore of the real world through generations of readers. The story has no moral dimension to speak of and is therefore unusual for nineteenth century children's literature, but it does extol caution and other common sense values in the often foolish choices made by Alice that take her deeper into the strange dimension. Its popularity among adults has led to it being translated into Latin.

***She* by H. Rider Haggard (1886)**

She was written in the flush of success following the publication of *King Solomon's Mines* (1886) and was published in its wake in 1887. Again Haggard drew on his substantial knowledge of Africa and ancient legends but now he worked with darker material. *She* is narrated by a man seemingly without family called Ludwig Horace Holly. A beautiful and powerful white queen of an African tribe ("She who must be obeyed") is the center of attention here as she falls in love with the English explorer. Even her name, Ayesha, indicates magic and mystery. *She* is more sophisticated but also much more disturbing than *King Solomon's Mines*, even in its raising up of the concept of "Truth" in a nightmarish world where we see pits filled with skeletons and the like. *She* spawned a number of much lesser sequels, including *Ayesha: The Return of She* (1905) and the risible *She and Allan* (1921). *She*'s admirers included Jung who used it as an example of his "anima" concept.

***Dracula* by Bram Stoker (1897)**

Dracula surely needs little introduction, being the most famous tale of vampirism and the one to which all since it was published in 1897 have aspired to. However, with the numerous adaptations and cinematic rejuvenations and rejiggings of the legend (from *Nosferatu* to *Blackula*) have come many bastardizations of the original tale and character. The novel is told via the diary entries of the young solicitor Jonathan Harker, his fiancée Mina, Lucy Westenra and Dr John Seward (who is in charge of a lunatic asylum in Essex). We travel to the Transylvanian abode of Count Dracula, a strange and disturbing castle. His purpose is to settle a land deal for Seward but he is drawn into bizarre and horrifying experiences within the castle walls. The action then passes to England as the Count travels in amongst fifty large wooden boxes and on board ship finishes off the entire crew before disappearing at Whitby in the shape of a wolf. Back on land, Lucy is vampirized by Dracula and dies despite the intervention of the wise and knowledgeable Professor Van Helsing. Mina too is in danger and has to be protected from Dracula's advances. The adventure concludes with a thrilling and conclusive return to Transylvania. *Dracula* is not Stoker's only novel, and he also wrote short-stories and dramatic criticism but this tale stands apart. It was influenced by the story 'Carmilla' in Le Fanu's *In A Glass Darkly* (1872).