



# DREAMING FRANKENSTEIN

## *The Creation of a Modern Myth*

by Anne Whitaker

**T**wo hundred years ago this year, in the early hours of June 22, 1816, two months before her 19th birthday, a young English writer called Mary Shelley went to bed. According to her account, in that liminal time between waking and sleep:

*... I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life ... Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world ...<sup>1</sup>*

Less than two years later, in January 1818, that waking nightmare had taken shape, leading to the publication of one of the world's most famous novels, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, in which Mary Shelley offered us a warning of what might be the consequences of humankind's stepping over moral limits in the pursuit of scientific discovery. This warning has resonated down the centuries; it is more relevant now than ever, as we engage with a new millennium and as the pace of technology-led progress leads us fast into dangerously uncharted physical, emotional, ethical, and spiritual territory.

The modern myth which Mary Shelley created centred on the scientist Victor Frankenstein, who created a human out of reassembled body parts and then, repelled by his creation, rejected it with devastating results. The

following quote, commenting on the announcement in February 1997 of the world's first cloned sheep, Dolly, in the 200th anniversary year of Mary's birth, beautifully evokes her book's continuing significance:

*[This] Dr. Frankenstein wore a wool sweater and a baggy parka ... Dr. Ian Wilmut, the first man to conceive fully formed life from adult body parts since Mary Shelley's mad scientist. Wilmut may not look the part of Frankenstein, or God the Father — but he played it.<sup>2</sup>*

### Background

Mary Shelley was born in London, England, on August 30, 1797; aberrant storms and wild weather were sweeping Europe, the tides of political passion generated by the French and American revolutions still ran high, and the

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Romantic movement in literature was at its peak.<sup>3</sup> Her life profoundly, dazzlingly, and poignantly reflected her times.

Her mother was the progressive feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft, author of the famous book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), probably the first feminist social manifesto.<sup>4</sup> Her father was the equally progressive philosopher and novelist William Godwin; his stature approached that of French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose revolutionary ideas had provided much of the fire for the French Revolution of 1789.<sup>5</sup>

Mary Shelley's mother, then in her late thirties, died ten days after her daughter's birth, leaving a painful emotional void in Mary. Her father remarried in 1801 when Mary was four, bringing her a stepmother whom she always hated and two step-siblings, Charles and Jane. Mary grew up in a highly intellectual household with distinguished literary visitors, such as writers Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Leigh Hunt. Her precocious intellectual development was nurtured by her father; her feminism, by her mother's legacy.

Mary first glimpsed the famous and notorious English poet Lord Byron in 1811, and briefly met the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley on November 11, 1812. In the spring of 1814, she met Shelley again. On Sunday, June 26, 1814, at her mother's graveside, they declared their love — an evening that decided her destiny. Percy Shelley was still married to his first wife at the time, and Mary was only 16 years old. Their elopement to France in July of that year, followed by their open cohabitation after they returned several weeks later, scandalised their contemporaries.

From then on, until Percy Shelley's untimely death by drowning in 1822, when he was only 29, the two young radicals' life together was dogged by scandal, debt, frequent moves of residence, the constant drain on their resources caused by literary hangers-on of various levels of talent, Percy's ex-wife Harriet's suicide, and the premature deaths of three of their

four children. However, despite all the turmoil of their life, they never ceased their daily studies of literature or their writing. Percy was a great supporter of Mary's writing in general and her authorship of *Frankenstein* in particular.<sup>6</sup>

From the moment I first set eyes on Mary Shelley's horoscope, it has compelled and fascinated me. As an astrology teacher, I have used it in many of my interpretation classes since the late 1980s. Some years ago, I realised that Mary had conceived the plot of *Frankenstein* during the summer before her 19th birthday, and finished writing it before she was 20, thus highlighting the 18.6-year lunar nodal cycle — the time it takes for the nodes to return to their natal position.

## Foreground: The Moon's Nodes

The Moon's North and South Nodes "... are not planets but are the two points at which the Moon's monthly path crosses the Sun's annual path (ecliptic) around the Earth. These are abstract points, but astrology accords them the power and effective status of planets..."<sup>7</sup> The North Node returns to its natal starting point every 18.6 years, highlighting the significance of the whole nodal axis and its connections with a person's unfolding life.

My favourite metaphor of the meaning of the Moon's nodes is very succinct; it comes from astrologer and

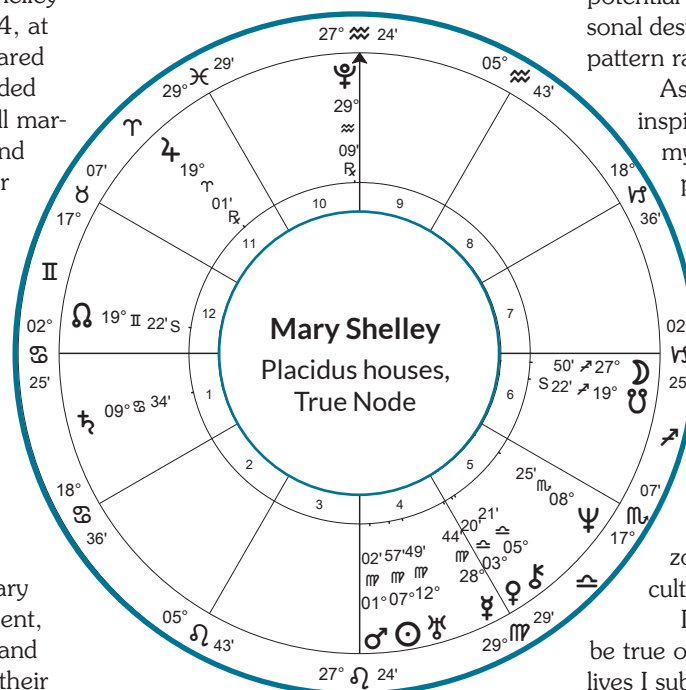
Mary Shelley conceived the plot of *Frankenstein* during the summer before her 19th birthday, thus highlighting the 18.6-year lunar nodal cycle.

writer Michael Lutin, who set it in the context of taking on a drinking problem, with the South Node being the bottle and the North Node the (Alcoholics Anonymous) meeting. This made me laugh out loud, but its pungent wisdom has stayed with me as an apt summary.<sup>8</sup>

There are many definitions of the nodes' significance in a natal horoscope. Most boil down to the South Node's denoting the place of comfort, ease, familiarity, holding gifts which one can easily access (from former lives or one's genetic inheritance, depending on what you believe). The North Node, on the other hand, points to the direction towards which you should strive in order to develop and use those gifts to their fullest potential in the unfolding of your personal destiny. This axis speaks of a life pattern rather than personality traits.

As is often the case when one is inspired by a new idea or concept, my attraction to the nodes as a particular focus for study had personal links. In my chart, the North Node is exactly conjunct my Midheaven (MC) at 29° Taurus, square a 12th-house Sun-Moon conjunction. I came to realise that my first and second nodal returns had coincided with life-changing endings and new beginnings, which pushed me out of my comfort zones at the time and into difficult but developmental territory.

I found this core dynamic to be true of clients and students whose lives I subsequently began to observe



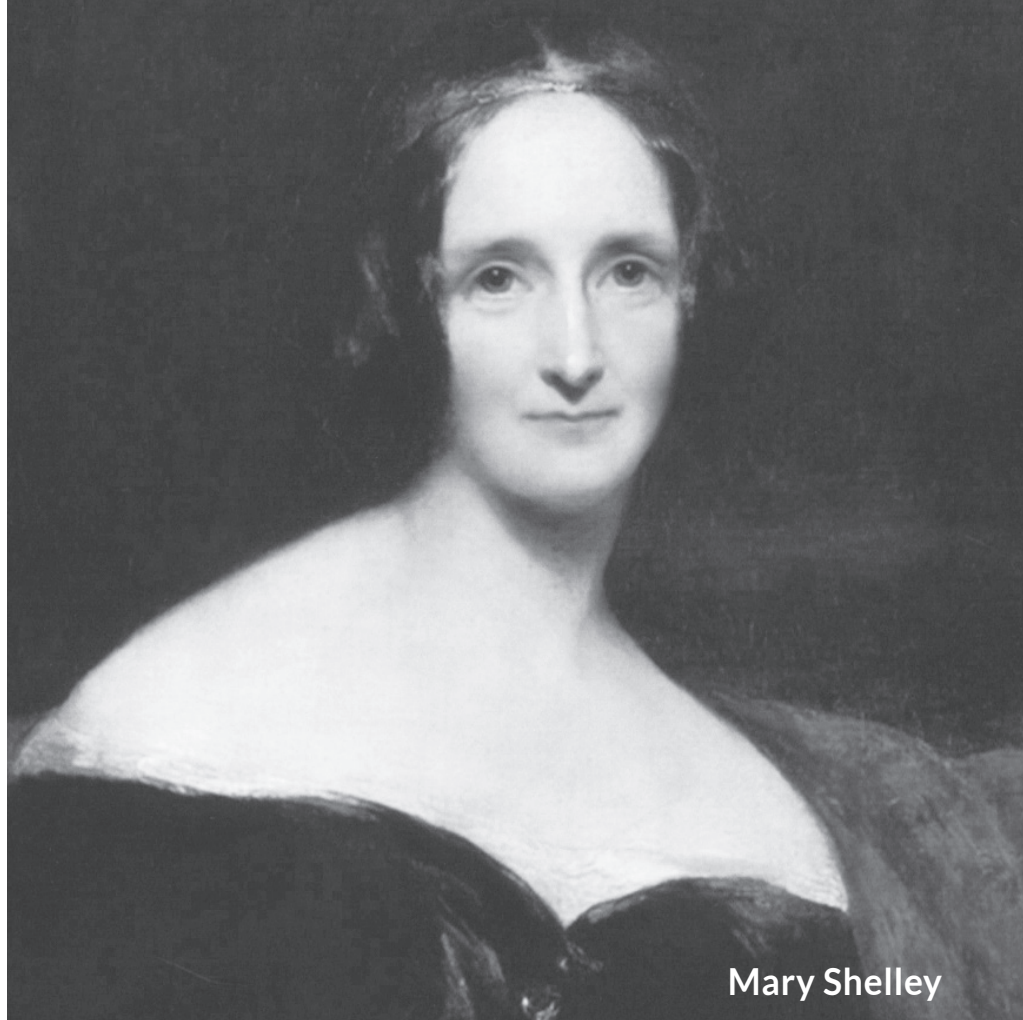
through the lens of the nodal axis, with particular reference to the nodal returns. It also became evident that the more prominently the nodal axis was highlighted in an individual's horoscope — e.g., if Uranus–Pluto opposite the Moon squared the nodal axis — the more critical were the developmental challenges confronted and (hopefully) taken on during the nodal return at ages 18–19, 36–38, 55–57, and so on. Eventually, my fascination led to a whole research study, *The Moon's Nodes in Action*, in which I explored Mary Shelley's authorship of *Frankenstein* as one of the case studies.

### Mary's Horoscope through the Nodal Lens

Looking more closely at the 12th-house placement of the North Node in Mary Shelley's chart, and how it connects with Jupiter, Uranus, Mercury, and Pluto–MC (see **Chart**, previous page), sent me on an examination of her horoscope from the perspective of the nodal axis and its links. Astrology certainly offers good symbolic pointers to suggest why she, as such a young woman, had been chosen to deliver a foreshadowing via *Frankenstein*, her masterpiece, of the grim results which might well follow scientific endeavour being pursued without compassion or due regard for ethics or morality.

Mary's North Node falls in Gemini, so the South Node is in Sagittarius. This denotes a life path centred around the conceptualising and disseminating of information and ideas. The Sagittarius South Node shows a background in philosophy, education, and the developing of an ethical base for life, as well as a desire to proselytise from that base, as foundational to her life. A love of learning, along with a restless, questioning, travel-oriented spirit and an appreciation of the perspective which comes from exposure to different languages, cultures, and broad knowledge, all characterised her inherited gifts — and the cultural context from which her life journey began.

The South Node also suggests (and its wide conjunction with the Moon backs this up)<sup>9</sup> a need from the beginning for a “grand,” adventurous life — a life infused with vision and possessing a big canvas upon which to paint a vivid



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picture. Mary Shelley's political and artistic context was the aftermath of the American and French revolutions of the late 18th century and the impact they had on the fabric of her time, plus the Romantic movement in art and literature into which her nature fitted so well. Also indicated in this linking of the South Node and Moon is a distaste for the restrictions of the ordinary and mundane and the potential for arrogance through conviction of one's own rightness.

The North Node in Gemini conjures up the image of Mary's taking the gifts she was given and putting the inspiration they provided into words — getting her ideas out into the world. It also denotes frequent changes of environment whilst attending to this core task, with sibling issues playing an important part in the whole scenario. Indeed they did: Her stepsister Jane/Clare/Claire Clairmont (who liked changing her name!) dogged Mary's footsteps for most of her life. Restless movement and frequent change were very much part of Mary's and her poet husband Percy Shelley's existence; perhaps the North Node in Gemini demanded this as a way for

Mary to shake free her ideas and keep them flowing.

When contemplating the location of the North Node — in the 12th house in one of the Gauquelin Plus Zones<sup>10</sup> — the notion of the Big Picture comes in again, from a different perspective. Here is someone whose life path requires an offering of her ideas in such a way as to reflect the hidden, unconscious currents running beneath the

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surface of her time — perhaps a transmitting of images which would be borne on those currents to provide insights to generations as yet unborn.

The location of the South Node and Moon in Sagittarius in the 6th house, opposite the North Node in Gemini in the 12th, evokes a picture of the visionary writer, in touch with the collective unconscious of her time through the 12th-house North Node, having to struggle to extract her vision from the mire of the mundane which was forever besetting her. The nuts and bolts of ordinariness — of the body, of routines, of maintenance tasks which keep the main thrust of life running smoothly — strike me as a major provenance of the 6th house. Mary had trouble with ordinariness all her days. She regularly moved her goods and chattels, relatives, friends, and children around. Her health was always delicate, childbirth drained her, and the deaths of three of her children made it sometimes impossible for her to dredge up any inspiration to offer through the 12th-house North Node. Until Percy Shelley died, he protected her from the sharpest edges of their constant financial troubles.

Mary had a strong masculine side which her horoscope clearly portrays. For example, Mars, the Sun, and Uranus in the angular 4th house are vividly indicative of the reckless defiance with which she disregarded the conventions of the times dictating how women ought to conduct themselves. Although Virgo, being a feminine/yin sign, is often seen as submissive, the word “submissive” was probably largely absent from Mary’s vocabulary, driven out by the sheer wilful force of that lineup of Mars, Uranus, and the Sun at her horoscope’s very core.

## Powerful Contacts to the Lunar Nodes

Looking at the planets aspecting the nodal axis offers further sharp images of the nature of Mary Shelley’s life path and her struggle to follow it. Jupiter is retrograde in Aries in the 11th house, partile trine the South Node and sextile the North Node. A quote from Mary’s biographer, Emily Sunstein,

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sums this up well: “Aspiration, enthusiasm, challenge, active mind and spirit, and optimism were among her cardinal qualities ... it was her incapacity for resignation to cold reality that eventually wore her down.”<sup>11</sup>

Jupiter, dispositor of the Sagittarius Moon and South Node, placed in Aries in the 11th house shows how group associations, frequently involving famous men and usually encountered at home, shaped her life. Jupiter’s falling on the southern side of the nodal axis, trining the South Node and sextiling the North Node, indicates gifts from the past which could be used productively by Mary in actualising her full potential — as indeed they were.

There was her father, the renowned social philosopher Godwin, and his salon that brought young Mary in contact with the famous English symbolist poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Hearing him reading from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* had a profound impact on her, and this came out much later in some of the imagery in *Frankenstein*. She met her husband Percy Shelley through Godwin when Shelley was his young acolyte, but their relationship did not begin to develop fully until the early summer of 1814, following Shelley’s visits to her home to arrange to lend Godwin money. Subsequently, through Shelley, she met Byron whom she had seen only very briefly some years before. She was in the company of Byron, Percy Shelley, and others at the atmospheric Villa Diodati overlooking Lake

Geneva in Italy, during a violent storm in the summer of 1816, when Byron challenged all present to write a ghost story. Mary’s waking dream that night turned into the horror tale that became *Frankenstein*, the most famous and notorious novel of her era.

Perhaps retrograde Jupiter in Aries indicates an early leap to fame (with transiting Jupiter conjunct her Moon when *Frankenstein* was published in January 1818). Such fame was never to be replicated, although Mary remained in the public eye as a writer, editor, and critic. I think Jupiter also shows the arrogant and unrealistic side of her optimism. For example, by eloping with the still-married Shelley while she was in her teens in the early 19th century, and having an illegitimate child, she flouted the conventions of that time to such a shocking degree that she was never accepted back into the mainstream of society, despite her expectation that this would eventually happen. This social ostracism caused her great pain all her life, although she learned to live with it.

Uranus (which rules the MC and disposes Pluto) in the 4th house in Virgo, squaring the nodal axis, is the most vivid signifier for her unorthodox inheritance, her own defiance of convention, her connection with Percy Shelley, and her authorship of *Frankenstein* which assured her place in literary history. This signifier is strengthened if we extend it to include the Uranus/Mercury midpoint, the Sun/Venus midpoint, and the Mercury/Sun midpoint at 18°–20° Virgo — all square the nodes. This major t-square is powerfully linked with the horoscopes of key individuals in her life, such as her parents, Byron, and Shelley. It also links with events critical to the unfolding of her destiny.<sup>12</sup>

*Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* is the full title of Mary Shelley’s first and most famous book. In the myth of Prometheus lie core images of Mary’s own origins; the times in which she lived; the essential nature of Percy Bysshe Shelley, born like her with the Sun conjunct Uranus; how she defied convention; the price she paid for this; and, most of all, the central theme of her masterpiece.

In essence, Prometheus in Greek mythology was a Titan who stole some of the fire of knowledge from the gods

and gave it to humanity to help them in their development. For this hubristic act, the gods punished Prometheus savagely. He was chained to a rock, and during the day an eagle came and pecked out his liver, which grew again during the night so that he could be subjected to the same pain the next day, ad infinitum.

The myth of Prometheus speaks most vividly, dynamically, and poignantly of the human condition. Following the example of this Titan, we seem driven by an unceasing restless quest to push back the frontiers of knowledge, thereby defying our limits as mortal human beings chained to the programmed life-span of the body and the inexorable cycle of birth, growth, flowering, decline, and death which governs everything in existence.

## Conclusion

Viewing Mary Shelley's authorship of *Frankenstein* through the lens of astrological symbolism, with special focus on the Moon's nodes, certainly helps to explain why she wrote it.

*Frankenstein's* geophysical backdrop was the famous "year without a summer" of 1816, with major climate disruption caused by the massive volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia in 1815.<sup>13</sup> The novel's sociopolitical backdrop was the disruptive fallout from the American and French revolutions. Its immediate context was the community of socially and politically radical writers in which Mary Shelley grew up. Its author was the very young,

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motherless, and troubled but highly literate and gifted Mary. These interwoven conditions were galvanised by the highly charged presence of the charismatic Byron and the challenge he delivered on that stormy night of June 22, 1816.

Perhaps we could view Mary Shelley's nodal axis, in the year of its first return, as the symbolic lightning rod conducting the creative charge which ran through her mind, mirroring the lightning over Lake Geneva that famous night, bringing to life the unforgettable Monster of her darkest imaginings.

It remains extraordinary that, at such a young age, Mary Shelley should have become, through her writing, the vehicle for a modern reframing of the myth of Prometheus which endures to this very day. I'd like to give the last words to Emily Sunstein, whose wonderfully readable, scholarly book I'd recommend to anyone who is interested in Mary Shelley's remarkable life:

Mary Shelley ... will be best remembered for her perception in *Frankenstein* ... that the Promethean drive is at the heart of human progress and yet a bringer of new ills if not focused on ethical means and ends ...<sup>14</sup>

**Author's Note:** The much longer case study from which this article is adapted was published in *Considerations* magazine, XIX: 3 (August–October 2004) as "Mary Shelley: Frankenstein's Creator." A short extract appears on my blog, "Writing from the Twelfth House," as "Mary Shelley: modern myth-maker," posted in March 2011. The study also appears in full in *The Moon's Nodes in Action*, which can be obtained as a free download from my blog <http://www.astrologyquestionsandanswers.com>, or from Astrodienst: <http://www.astro.com>

## Chart Data and Source

**Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley**, August 30, 1797; 11:20 p.m. LMT; London, England (51°N30', 00°W10'); AA: quoted by her father, present at her birth, and cited in Paul Wright, *Astrology in Action*, Anodyne Publishing, 1988.

## References and Notes

1. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, from the Author's Introduction to the Standard Novel's Edition, 1831, p. 50.

2. From the Science (Biology) section of *Time* magazine's *Time Annual 1997: The Year in Review*, Time Books, 1998, p. 116.

3. For more about Romanticism (the Romantic movement), see *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. M. Drabble, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 853–854.

4. Emily W. Sunstein, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 13.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

6. All the biographical facts and dates appearing in this paragraph and the rest of the article are taken from Sunstein's excellent, well-researched book.

7. Nicholas Campion, *The Practical Astrologer*, Times Mirror Books, 1987, p. 12.

8. Michael Lutin, *SunShines: The Astrology of Being Happy*, Fireside Press, Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2007.

9. I have always been comfortable with using the same orbs for the Moon's nodes (i.e., up to 10°) as are generally used for both the Sun and Moon, the intersection of whose orbits the lunar nodes depict. I have found this orb allowance to work well in horoscope analysis.

10. For more about Gauquelin Plus Zones (the 12th house), see Michel Gauquelin, *Written in the Stars*, Aquarian Press, 1988, p. 120.

11. Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, p. 402.

12. Further detail on those connections can be found in my work, *The Moon's Nodes in Action*, Chapter 2, Case Study 1: Mary Shelley, "Frankenstein" and a Sheep called Dolly, p. 23.

13. Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1815\\_eruption\\_of\\_Mount\\_Tambora](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1815_eruption_of_Mount_Tambora) (accessed in January 2016).

14. Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, p. 403.

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