

## Section 8. Philology and linguistics

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### THE ETYMOLOGICAL AND PRAGMATIC ASPECTS OF PERSONAL NAMES IN MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN

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#### Abstract

This article examines the etymological origins and pragmatic functions of personal names in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). While the novel has been extensively analyzed from philosophical, psychological, and cultural perspectives, its anthroponymic system remains relatively underexplored. A total of eight main character names were analyzed: Victor Frankenstein, the Creature (unnamed), Elizabeth Lavenza, Henry Clerval, Alphonse Frankenstein, William Frankenstein, Justine Moritz, and Robert Walton. Combining etymological analysis and pragmatic-literary analysis, this research identifies patterns linking etymology and narrative function. The conducted analysis allowed the characters' names to be classified according to their thematic and ethical functions. Results indicate that Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley employs names as semiotic tools to reinforce themes of creation, ambition, morality, and alienation. The absence of a personal name for the Creature emerges as a deliberate pragmatic strategy emphasizing dehumanization and existential otherness. These findings contribute to broader literary onomastics and support the thesis that naming in Romantic literature operates as an ideological and emotional code rather than a neutral narrative device.

**Keywords:** *literary onomastics, pragmatics, etymology, Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, personal names, Romantic literature*

#### Introduction

Personal names in literature function not only as identifiers but also as semantic, psychological, and cultural markers. This

research focuses on the personal names in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, analyzing their etymological origins and narrative roles. The combined analysis shows how the choice and

use of names contribute to the ethical and philosophical dimensions of the novel. In Romantic literature, naming practices often articulate philosophical tensions of individuality, morality, and social belonging (Barczewska, 2020). Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* offers a compelling field for such analysis, presenting characters whose names reveal deeper symbolic dimensions. As Yunusova (2021, p. 3007) points out, proper names in fiction play a significant role in organizing the structure of a literary text. Their systematic use conveys human relationships, nuances of intimacy, social roles, age, and other characteristics. In any narrative, a character is established in the reader's mind not only through their name, but also through appearance, personality traits, actions, thoughts, and distinctive speech.

*Frankenstein* is one of the first novels in the Gothic tradition and a landmark of Romantic literature. This novel, written in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century during the Romantic era, explores themes that were relevant at that time, such as horror, sin, the sublime, the conflict between human reason and the laws of nature, scientific ambition, and moral responsibility. Previous scholars have discussed the novel in terms of Gothic aesthetics (Botting, 2018), ethics of scientific ambition (Mellor, 1988), and existential identity (Knoepfmacher, 2009), yet its anthroponymic system has not been sufficiently examined from a linguistic perspective.

Thus, the present research aims to fill this gap by exploring the etymological roots and narrative functions of character names in *Frankenstein*. The analysis focuses on how names reflect character traits and emotional dynamics, and how the absence of naming, particularly in the case of the Creature, becomes a pragmatic aspect of literary and moral exclusion.

To achieve this goal, the following tasks are to be completed:

- To examine the origins and meanings of the characters' names in *Frankenstein*;
- To analyze how these names express the characters' personalities
- To explore the Creature's lack of a name as a way of showing his alienation;

- To show how names in the novel reflect moral and thematic functions.

### Methods

This study employed a qualitative literary-linguistic methodology grounded in principles of etymological and pragmatic-literary analysis. The research design was interpretive and text-centered, focusing on how anthroponyms operate as semantic and narrative units within Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).

The methodological framework consisted of three main components:

1. Etymological analysis. The etymology of each selected name was traced through Indo-European linguistic sources, with emphasis on Greek, Latin, Germanic, and Romance roots. Standard etymological dictionaries and online linguistic corpora were consulted to establish historically verifiable meanings, semantic shifts, and cultural connotations associated with each name at the time of the novel's composition and publication.

2. Pragmatic-literary analysis. Each name was examined within the narrative context to determine its pragmatic function, including its role in character construction, thematic development, emotional framing, and narrative point-of-view structuring. Principles of literary pragmatics and speech-act theory were applied to assess the communicative power of naming and the effects produced by the absence of a name in the case of the Creature.

Corpus and Data Sources. Primary data consisted of personal names appearing in the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. Secondary sources included scholarly literature on Romanticism, literary onomastics, narrative pragmatics, and Shelley studies from peer-reviewed journals and academic monographs.

Sample of Names Analyzed. Victor Frankenstein, the unnamed Creature, Elizabeth Lavenza, Henry Clerval, Alphonse Frankenstein, William Frankenstein, Justine Moritz, and Robert Walton.

#### Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages:

- 1) lexical-etymological identification and meaning extraction,
- 2) contextual interpretation of name usage within specific narrative passages and

3) synthesis of etymological and pragmatic insights to determine symbolic and thematic functions.

This multi-layered approach ensured both linguistic precision and literary contextualization, aligning the study with established research practices in comparative literature and linguistic anthropology.

### Results

The name of the main character, Victor, in the novel comes from Latin roots and means “a conqueror” (Arthur, 1857, p. 289). Therefore, this name signifies strengths and the achievement of goals. In the novel, Victor strives to defeat death by creating life artificially, thereby attempting to take the place of God. His obsession with this goal is shown in his speech:

*No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success. Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world* (Shelley, 2016, p. 26).

Thus, this passage expresses Victor's strong desire to cross the boundaries between life and death. However, he creates a monster by mistake and abandons it without even naming it. As a result, his creation suffers, pursues revenge, and ultimately destroys Victor's entire family. After numerous tragedies, Victor searches for his creation for a long time to kill it.

The surname of Victor Frankenstein was not found in traditional etymological dictionaries. According to Palaeas (2005), it literally means “marked in stone” and is probably related to the ruins of the castle mentioned by Mary Shelley in her 1814 travel diary. The surname may function as a metonymic device: all but one of the Frankenstein family members lie dead, and their surname, “marked in stone,” becomes a grim reminder of Victor's inability to take moral responsibility for his creation (p. 211). Frleta and Frleta (2020, pp. 53–54) note that Mary Shelley may have chosen the surname Frankenstein because she once lived near a village of the same name. The name can also be interpreted as a combination of frank “free” and stein “stone”, reflecting both Victor's scientific freedom and his resolute, steadfast character.

In the novel, Victor's best friend since childhood is Henry Clerval. His name is derived from the Saxon *Honoricus* and means “honorable” (Arthur, 1857, p. 281). As a character, Henry perfectly reflects the meaning of his name through his kind and noble nature. He is described in the novel as follows: “*Clerval was no natural philosopher. His imagination was too vivid for the minutia of science. Languages were his principal study...*” (Shelley, 2016, P. 34–35). Thus, in the novel, he is the complete opposite of Victor in interests and character. While Victor is obsessively focused on science and experiments, he is interested in literature and languages. He also values friendship and kindness, supporting Victor in his most difficult times.

One of the most significant female characters who plays an important role in Victor Frankenstein's life is Elizabeth Lavenza. Her name originates from Hebrew, meaning “Oath of God” (Arthur, 1857, p. 293). In the novel, she is the adopted daughter of the Frankenstein family. She lives a harmonious life, providing Victor with the necessary emotional support. The following lines describe this character: “*This period was spent sadly; my mother's death, and my speedy departure, depressed our spirits; but Elizabeth endeavoured to renew the spirit of cheerfulness in our little society...*” (Shelley, 2016, p. 20). Following the fragment, Elizabeth tries to maintain an optimistic atmosphere in the family despite the grief, thus bringing joy back into their lives. She cares for others, which reveals her kind and caring nature. Her efforts also show that even in difficult times, a person can be a source of comfort to those around them.

Another important character is Alphonse, the head of the Frankenstein family. The name Alphonse, spelled as Alphonso in etymological sources, comes from Gothic *Hel-puns* and means “our help” (Arthur, 1857, p. 274). Shelley appears to choose this name specifically to show the character's kind and caring nature, who is ready to protect his family. In contrast to Victor, who prioritizes science, Alphonse places family above all else. As stated in the following lines:

*When my father became a husband and a parent, he found his time so occupied by the duties of his new situation, that he re-*

*linquished many of his public employments, and devoted himself to the education of his children...* (Shelley, 2016, p. 15).

This fragment confirms the idea that Alphonse is sacrificing his own time and personal interests while engaged in the upbringing and education of his children. When Victor's actions lead to the death of his closest people, Alphonse experiences profound grief, leading to his death. The comparison between father and son suggests that true strength lies not in the pursuit of excessive personal ambitions, but in responsibility and care for others.

Victor has a younger brother named William. The name is derived from the German *Wilhelm*, meaning "the shield or defense of many" (Arthur, 1857, p. 290). His tragic fate shows how fragile and vulnerable children are to the mistakes of others, as can be seen in the following extract: "*William, the youngest of our family, was yet an infant, and the most beautiful little fellow in the world...*" (Shelley, 2016, p. 19). In these lines, he is depicted as a symbol of childlike purity and innocence. He becomes the first victim of the Creature, and after his death, a chain of misfortunes begins, including the execution of Justine Moritz, the Frankenstein family's maid, after which Victor starts to experience profound guilt. Although the name William means "defender," he cannot protect himself from the Creature because of his brother's actions, which makes his name an ironic element in the novel.

The next victim of Victor's Creature is Justine Moritz. In etymological sources, the name appears in its original Latin form, *Justina*, denoting "just" and "virtuous" (Arthur, 1857, p. 283). In the novel, she is perceived not only as a servant but as a family member, having grown up with Victor and Elizabeth, helping care for the household. Despite her honest nature, Justine is blamed for William's death, as described in the following excerpt: "*Several strange facts combined against her, which might have staggered anyone who had not such proof of her innocence as I had*" (Shelley, 2016, p. 42). Following the extract, it becomes clear that she is wrongly accused when a miniature of William's mother is found in her pocket. Although the evidence appears overwhelming,

Victor and Elizabeth remain convinced of her innocence. In court, Justine, who is innocent, confesses to murder under moral pressure from the priest, as shown in the following excerpt: "*I did confess; but I confessed a lie. I confessed, that I might obtain absolution*" (Shelley, 2016, p. 45). After her confession, Justine is found guilty and executed, despite Elizabeth's protests. Later, Victor learns that the Creature framed Justine. In the novel, her image is a symbol of an innocent victim suffering for someone's guilt. Moreover, her fate creates an ironic contradiction between the meaning of her name and the real injustice she experienced.

The most profound onomastic gesture in the novel is the absence of a personal name for the Creature. Within the framework of pragmatic linguistics, naming constitutes an act of recognition, conferring social existence, legal subjectivity, and symbolic belonging (Austin, 1975). Shelley's refusal to name the Creature is not a passive omission but an intentional act of narrative erasure. The repeated use of labels such as *daemon*, *fiend*, and *wretch* functions as linguistic exclusion and moral stigmatization, producing what contemporary theory terms symbolic violence. This systemic denial of linguistic identity mirrors broader Romantic concerns with the limits of human empathy, the construction of the Other, and the ethical implications of creation without care. As Radonjic Strid (2020, p. 10) notes, names are traditionally given to children by their parents; however, Victor, as the only parental figure for the Creature, fails to fulfill this role. He refers to his creation solely with derogatory terms such as "wretch" and "monster," which significantly influence the development of the Creature's identity.

The narrator of the story is Robert Walton. As an English sailor and a commander of an expedition to the North Pole, he strives to achieve a great discovery and to become renowned in the field of geography. His name, Robert, is derived from the Saxon words *rod* "counsel" and *beorht* "bright", giving the overall meaning "famous in counsel" (Arthur, 1857, p. 287). The novel begins with letters from Walton to his sister, Margaret Saville, in which he describes the meeting with Victor and retells his narrative. There are notable

similarities between him and Victor, particularly in his strong desire for discovery, as reflected in his words:

*... I feel my heart glow with an enthusiasm which elevates me to heaven; for nothing contributes so much to tranquilize the mind as a steady purpose, a point on which the soul may fix its intellectual eye. This expedition has been the favourite dream of my early years... (Shelley, 2016, p. 6).*

These words reveal Walton's strong ambition for research, reflecting his childhood dream of accomplishing something remarkable. He is confident in his aspiration, but his passion manifests as inspiration rather than obsession. His speech also conveys the joy of a man who fully dedicates himself to a particular goal. However, unlike Victor, Walton knows when to temper his ardor. Drawing on Victor's tragic story, he reflects on the dangers of unchecked ambition and exemplifies this in the following fragment:

*I have lost my hopes of utility and glory; I have lost my friend. But I will endeavour to detail these bitter circumstances to you, my dear sister; and, while I am wafted toward England, and towards you, I will not despond (Shelley, 2016, p. 119).*

His writing demonstrates Robert's critical thinking and his ability to make wise decisions by learning from the mistakes of others. After hearing Victor's story and losing his friend, he realizes that excessive ambition can lead to tragedy. Consequently, he decides to stop the expedition and turn the ship back, protecting his crew from danger. Through this character, it can be concluded that the pursuit of achievement can be positive if combined with responsibility, whereas ignoring his trait may result in serious consequences.

The analysis shows that the names of the characters in *Frankenstein* are not accidental. They carry important semantic and symbolic meanings that contribute to the interpretation of the novel. Mary Shelley uses names as a literary device through which she reveals the inner world of her characters and draws attention to the key ideas of the narrative. The etymology and pragmatic function of the names illuminate the motives behind the characters' actions and clarify how their personal qualities shape the events of the sto-

ry. In several cases, Shelley also introduces an element of irony, allowing a striking contrast between the meaning of a name and the fate of its owner.

### Conclusion

This investigation confirms that anthroponyms in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* function as highly charged semiotic units, weaving together etymological inheritance, narrative pragmatics, and Romantic ideology. Far from serving as inert labels, personal names operate as discursive engines: they choreograph moral alignments, foreshadow character arcs, and dramatise the novel's central dialectic between promethean aspiration and ethical accountability. By embedding Greco-Latin, Germanic, and Biblical resonances within her character roster, Shelley constructs a multilayered linguistic matrix through which creation, alienation, and responsibility are simultaneously asserted and problematised.

The Creature's namelessness remains the novel's most radical onomastic gesture. This purposeful linguistic void foregrounds contemporary debates on personhood, social recognition, and the ethical duty of the creator toward the created. In denying her "modern Prometheus" the ontological anchor of a proper name, Shelley crystallises Romantic anxieties about the instability of identity and the perils of technological hubris untempered by compassion. The resulting discursive exclusion transforms nomenclature into a site of symbolic violence – one that shapes the reader's moral imagination as powerfully as the narrative events themselves.

Collectively, these insights extend existing scholarship by demonstrating how onomastics supplies the critical infrastructure of Shelley's thematic architecture. Names in *Frankenstein* are not mere ornaments; they are ideological signposts guiding readers through an exploration of the limits of human dominion, the fragility of ethical responsibility, and the contested boundaries of the human. In this respect, the novel anticipates later theoretical frameworks – from structuralist semiotics to post-Foucauldian discourse theory, which position language as a primary locus of power and subject formation.

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