

Grant Patten

"The Chinese Box Narrative Structure and its Effects in Frankenstein"

Your essay contains many extremely imaginative and insightful correlations between the narrative structure of the novel and the qualities of the characters themselves. If I have one complaint, it was that your essay does not contain a single direct quote from the text. There are areas of your work where a direct analysis of the text would have been extremely helpful, especially in your analysis of the concept of "process" in the narrative and in Frankenstein's intellectual progress; I need to see examples of this "process" in order to be fully convinced of your argument. Normally I would penalize such a lapse fairly severely, but I think the cogency of your arguments in many respects compensates for the lack of direct textual evidence. Be careful in the future, however.

Mark: 85% / A

**The Chinese Box Narrative Structure and its
Effects in *Frankenstein***
ENG110Y

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The contiguous 'Chinese Box' narrative structure that Mary Shelley chose to base her writing of *Frankenstein* upon can serve as a source of intrigue for some readers just as it can serve as a source of frustration for others. When analyzed carefully, however, it becomes clear that the structure is not arbitrary and serves a very relevant purpose. This careful ^{Not a word} analysis will reveal that the structure serves as a metaphor which gives insight into and offers criticism of the three main characters' particular natures; the structure provides a basis for more narrative structures within itself that add to the complexity of the whole story; and finally the structure gives *Frankenstein* both subjective and entertaining qualities that enhance the novel in terms of depth and creativity. Lot of topics, though they sound very interesting

In relation to *Frankenstein*, the idea behind the Chinese Box narrative structure can perhaps be best summarized by saying that it is a story within a story within yet another story. It can be further understood by thinking about it in relation to Chinese dolls, (Resource, 2004) where Walton's narrative is the biggest doll, *Frankenstein's* is the smaller doll, and The Creature's is the smallest doll. This makes sense because each successive character's story evolves out of the preceding character's story. Without Walton's story we would not have been introduced to *Frankenstein's* story and without *Frankenstein's* story we would not have been introduced to The Creature's story.

With the concept behind the actual structure clarified we can now move on to an evaluation of how exactly the structure effects the novel *Frankenstein* as a whole. It is arguably most significant as a metaphorical device that compliments the relationship between the two major characters in the novel, Victor *Frankenstein* and The Creature. Notice that in the Chinese Box structure The Creature's story evolves out of *Frankenstein's* story and therefore the two are utterly and inseparably interconnected, as

if the two are integral to one another's nature. This structural observance can be metaphorically attributed to the content of the novel as well. By rejecting his creation, Victor Frankenstein actually rejects something much more significant -- an integral component of his own being, and these philosophical implications are exactly how Mary Shelley's novel transcends the realm of 'ghost story' (Chalquist, 2004) ^{re}ordinariness. This integral component of Frankenstein's being is, of course, that of evil ^{and darkness} and fallibility and wrongness. In the structure, we see them connected as they should be; however, the structure doesn't coincide with Frankenstein's actions. Frankenstein led a very comfortable life up until his creation of The Creature, with his opulent family and respectable career and love for Elizabeth all forming an ostensibly ideal existence. But an insidious desire for more compelled him to inadvertently create a being that he felt repulsed by, and this Creature personifies the evil within Frankenstein that he refuses to come to terms with. Instead, Frankenstein blindly opposes this Creature and mass destruction results. While the best of men are able to reconcile the evil that is within them and thus restrain it in such a way that rarely does substantial harm, Frankenstein refuses to see himself in anything other than an idealistic light and this refusal to acknowledge his own fallibility causes much adversity. This conflict between Frankenstein and his human nature is externalized through his conflict with The Creature. This ultimately forms a metaphor for man's denial of his own fallibility and it is ironic in that if Frankenstein had accepted these negative qualities of himself it would have most probably resulted in a positive outcome as he would have then been one complete whole of a human being rather than the unrealistically idealistic vision of himself that he narrow-mindedly adhered to. Tragically, Frankenstein thought that he was opposing a

completely antagonistic force although it was actually integral to his very nature and therefore by not reconciling with his own 'dark side,' (Chalquist, 2004) Frankenstein unconsciously destroyed himself.

Another interesting interpretation can be devised from this same structural principle. Rather than argue that Frankenstein was completely unaware of The Creature's intended connection to him it could be argued that on a deeper, perhaps subconscious level Frankenstein's actions were guided by an attempt to make amends with his creation *which does, in particular?* and thus come to terms with these negative aspects of himself. To elaborate, consider Frankenstein's sudden decision to go after The Creature by himself. Rather than simply attributing this to Elizabeth's slaying, it could also be attributed to Frankenstein's subconscious attempts to reconcile himself with his creation – the fallible side of himself that he has thus far refused to acknowledge. Perhaps the force that really *compels* him to pursue The Creature is this, although he tragically never does become aware of his own subconscious motivations and thus he continues on with the violent and hopeless vendetta.

Also within the Chinese Box structure the connection between Walton and Frankenstein cannot be discounted. Walton begins to tell his story of exploring the Northern regions of the world and through this narrative we are told Frankenstein's narrative once Walton actually does meet up with the near-death doctor. Just as with Frankenstein and The Creature, then, Walton and Frankenstein are utterly and inseparably interconnected with one another in terms of structure and although it is definitely less apparent here than in the previous relationship, this structural interconnection mirrors an integral *interconnection* between the two characters of Walton and Frankenstein in the novel as well. Understanding the significance of this

interconnection ^{Frank.} lies in realizing that Walton and Frankenstein are essentially representations of the same type of man. They are different individuals but their most fundamental traits are identical. Frankenstein's most predominant character trait was his hubris (Joseph, 1969) – his belief that he could play God by creating his own human. Perhaps, it could be argued, Frankenstein was doing this simply to benefit mankind. But ^{which ones – quote} his pretentious ramblings practically nullify this belief as his interests were clearly with the achievement of personal 'glory' (Gothic, 2004) for himself and himself only through scientific recognition. This insanely lofty ambition of his was only partly achieved in that he did create a being but it was nowhere near what he had anticipated – his creation sickened him and this repulsion ultimately led to his own destruction. Walton was essentially in the very same position – he became motivated to sail North perhaps as a means of benefiting humanity by discovering new region but ultimately it was also his hubris and the desire for recognition and fame and glory that compelled him to sail on. The significance of this connection can also be attributed to the structure of the novel in that it reverts back upon itself in the end where we are reintroduced to Walton's letters, as in the beginning. The novel ends as Walton seems to be deciding to sail back to England, but will he be able to completely abandon the personal ambition that drove him before? It is ambiguous, as we never find out for sure; however, recalling Shelley's structural fusion of Walton and Frankenstein and also recalling her emphasis on fate throughout the novel, one can rationally theorize that Walton will inevitably end up suffering the same fate that Frankenstein did – a punishment for selfishly striving to achieve what is beyond his means. ^{You may have outargued your reputation.} This cyclical structure of the Chinese Box narrative implies quite a pessimistic viewpoint from Shelley in that she appears to be stating that man will never be able to

truly content ~~himself~~ with what he has; it is in his nature to continually strive for more until all is destroyed. ✓

The Chinese Box narrative structure can also be likened to a series of frames ~~where~~ in each narrative frame a different individual is narrating the events of the story. This structure therefore causes the reader to question the motives behind each different narrator's version of the events, as unlike in an omniscient narrative structure the narrator becomes an actual character within the story that he is narrating, giving this novel a more subjective perspective. That is to say, each narrator is therefore subject to his own prejudices and limitations and doubts on behalf of the reader. The reader who is concerned with truth and verisimilitude (Dehan, 2004) will find this text quite frustrating, as we never experience information first-hand or straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak. This unreliability is particularly evident in relation to the stories told by Frankenstein and The Creature since each is preoccupied with defending and justifying his own actions. The novel provides no objective foundation for its readers to base any of their interpretations upon, nor does it offer any definite facts of the matter – every perspective is potentially wrong, every narrator dubitable. ✓

It is important to remember that each narrative frame within the Chinese Box structure is ultimately told through Walton in a series of letters to his sister back in England. In this sense, the Chinese Box structure lends way to another structure within itself – this one being epistolary (Small, 1973) in nature. The significance of this lies in our realization that Walton's sister's initials are 'MWS' – Margaret W. Saville being the character's name, but let us not forget the author's name – Mary W. Shelley. This realization results in a process of transmission (Narrative, 2004) as it hauls the reader out

Jacobs → explain it for me.

of the novel's fictional realm and acts as a reminder of our own reading process. The receiver of this letter is a faceless, indiscernible, and entirely undeveloped character who remains in this nebulous position throughout the whole novel and these traits are exactly why we as readers are able to entrench ourselves within this story so well – the faceless nature of this character makes it easy for us to identify with her role as the receiver of Walton's, Frankenstein's, and The Creature's tales. And whenever a reader readily identifies with a character in any text, their interest obviously becomes enhanced.

It is now clear that Frankenstein's story fits inside Walton's letters and The Creature's story fits inside Frankenstein's; however, a constantly overlooked frame within this Chinese Box structure is whose story fits inside The Creature's story. To answer this we must recall The Creature's story about the love between Felix and Safie as well as his readings of such classic novels as *Paradise Lost*. These stories that fit inside The Creature's story are significant in that they serve as 'concrete manifestations' (Small, 1973) of The Creature's most personal emotions. The story of Felix and Safie involves betrayal in that Safie's father double-crosses Felix by attempting to prevent him from marrying his daughter after promising Felix otherwise. The Creature identifies with Felix's pain here as he also feels betrayed by someone – this someone being Victor Frankenstein. Also, the classically romantic love story between Felix and Safie seems to have an effect upon The Creature in that he also begins to feel a strong desire for companionship around this point in time. And then there is *Paradise Lost*, where The Creature reads about Adam and how he had also been renounced by his creator. The Creature also identifies with Adam in that he was the first of his kind. Yet despite all of

this empathy that The Creature feels, these stories only cause him to sink into deeper dejection and despair as he realizes how truly hopeless and tragic his own situation is. ✓

The Chinese Box narrative structure serves to draw the readers into each successive story, providing several differing perspectives concerning the actions and emotions in question and thus allowing us to identify with each character. This technique allows us to sympathize with all parties concerned – Walton, Frankenstein, and The Creature – despite the fact that many of their judgments concerning some of the actions that took place are discordant. In writing in this manner, Shelley manages to confuse our sense of right and wrong and therefore we are led to reevaluate our preconceived notions concerning human society and its values. In this sense, Shelley gives the reader the opportunity to not just identify with the aforementioned 'MVS' through transmission but also with each main character even though the characters see themselves and their world in quite different ways. ✓ Shelley never hits us over the head with definite statements about these characters; instead, we as readers are encouraged to draw our own conclusions about them.

The Chinese Box narrative structure also serves to amplify the suspense and entertainment value of the story. As Victor Frankenstein is telling his tale the reader knows that he has obviously not died yet despite having been tortured; however, we must make our way through the narrative frames if we want to find out how he got into such a state in the first place. We also sense that the conflict has not yet been resolved as we recall that Walton saw The Creature roaming around out on the ice; however, we must once again make our way through the narrative frames if we want to find out exactly what this conflict is.

The Chinese Box narrative structure also serves as a metaphor for the 'contiguous nature of knowledge' (Levine, 1979) in that it is like a connected process of exchange that is always more important and constant than the creation of an actual product. Frankenstein's narrow-minded concentration on the gaining of a product and rather rushed, expeditious manner of going through the process of learning harms him in the end as – even though he was clearly precocious and capable of consuming knowledge at such a fast pace – he failed to gauge his own precociousness and thus he failed to take crucial elements into account, such as how he might be by the unattractive countenance of his creation. This thought should've been apart of his process, but in skipping over it as well as other elements of the process he contributed to the tragic results of his own hastily created product – The Creature. Victor's tenure at university was marked by a frantically rapid and almost rabid consumption of knowledge. His ceaseless persistence led him to surpass and 'outstrip' (Maher, 2004) all of his professors. He immersed himself into the completion of his epistemological goal so fully that everyday reality and his relationships with people became obscured. Frankenstein's interests were in the natural sciences and therefore *life* in general; however, Shelley makes sure to clarify that this frenzied pace of his worked to becloud the potential meaning and relevance of his experiments, contrary to the results that would have most likely been yielded through a more meticulous attention to the knowledge process. Frankenstein's heedless and impetuous dash toward the accomplishment of his goals proved to be a tragic decision for him from the very beginning. The text's structure can therefore be interpreted as a critique of Frankenstein's methods as it represents the antithesis of his actions where a greater attention to process is given as a means of

Run-on sentence

perhaps too dramatic a term

✓ *Enkeation - but this section really*
acquiring knowledge. There is never really a final, defined product at the end of *requires direct quotation from the text.*
Frankenstein – it is an ongoing process with Walton's continued journey and in this manner Shelley's textual structure favors interaction and contiguity over product, unlike the character of Victor Frankenstein. The Chinese Box framing involves the transfer of information (thus, knowledge) through characters by a process of exchange where The Creature told Frankenstein and then Frankenstein told Walton and then Walton told his sister (us, the audience/readers.) This represents the process that Victor Frankenstein should have invested much more thought, care, and time into. ✓

Similarly, the structure acts as a critique of Frankenstein's actions in another way *that is different in concept*: the contiguity and narrative framing of the Chinese Box structure could also be thought to represent the gestational process (Maher, 2004) that Frankenstein – seen as an unloving and uncaring maternal figure to The Creature – goes through great lengths to neglect. The pregnant body demands attention to process. In pregnancy there is fusion and confusion and a necessity for contiguity between two entities that coexist in one somatic space. However, these entities are substantially different in that one is engaged in a process of *ing, perhaps* nurture whereas the other is engaged in a process of development. Nonetheless, the two entities must cohere because without this connection the process will never be able to reach that nascent point where a unified product is created. In Frankenstein's account of his childhood, however, we are provided no information about this process of development: he feels that it is necessary to tell us *Cite, quote.* about this moment of divergence from his mother's body yet he excludes any information concerning the history of the all-important gestational process that his mother went through and that he must have heard about as he grew up. Frankenstein's aforementioned

frenzied rush toward a creation overshadowed his concern for pre-birth care and nurture, which evolved into his subsequent refusal to care for and nurture his creation in post-birth as well. The Chinese Box structure critiques these actions of Frankenstein's once again as there is no rush toward a finished product here – instead, as explained earlier, the narrative emphasizes process. The connections between the characters, specifically that of Frankenstein and The Creature where The Creature's narrative evolves through Frankenstein's within the Chinese Box structure can be thought to represent this need for a connection between the creator and that which he creates – a connection that Victor Frankenstein so vehemently rejects from the moment of his creation's inception.

The reader who approaches *Frankenstein* looking for nothing more than an unsettling entertainment will likely not be disappointed, despite the narrative challenges that will remain even through the most superficial of readings. The frustration that can arise in many readers while reading this novel due to the complexity of its Chinese Box narrative structure will ultimately be worth it, especially for those who are reading the novel with scrutiny and deliberation. The overall value of the structure is undeniable as it adds a greater thematic depth and range of interpretation to *Frankenstein* that would simply not be there with a more traditional narrative structure.

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