Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*
Mary Shelley 1797-1851
Percy Bysshe Shelley 1792-1822
Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley—Literary Legacy

Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft – writer of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.

Her father, William Godwin, philosopher and writer of novels, political discourse. One of the first to advocate anarchism.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth were frequent visitors.
A bit of chronology

1814—meets and begins relationship with the married Percy Bysshe Shelley

1815—becomes pregnant. Percy’s wife, Harriet, is also pregnant. Neither infant survives for more than a few days.

1816—Mary and Percy flee England for Europe. She is again pregnant. Harriet Shelley commits suicide as does Mary’s half sister, Fanny. Mary Shelley begins writing the story that would become *Frankenstein*.

1818—*Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* is published.
He leaves home to study with scientists who “penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew how she works in her hiding places. They ascent into the heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows” (28).
Embedded Narratives

Robert Walton’s letters to his sister—then he tells Victor’s story—
which includes a nest of other stories, letters:

Victor’s story:
Creature’s story:
Agatha & Felix
Walton’s letter
“Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other, and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due. Remember, that I am thy creature: I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel . . . . Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous”(66).
“But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles or caresses . . . . From my earliest remembrance I had been as I was then in height and proportion. I had never yet seen a being resembling me, or who claimed any intercourse with me. What was I?”(81).
“My food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb and the kid, to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment. My companion will be of the same nature as myself, and will be content with the same fare. We shall make our bed of dried leaves; the sun will shine on us as on man, and will ripen our food” (99).
“He was soon borne away by the waves, and lost in the darkness and distance” (156).

THE END
Victor Frankenstein—the self-absorbed Romantic

“I rushed out of the court in agony. The tortures of the accused did not equal mine; she was sustained by innocence, but the pangs of remorse tore my bosom and would not forego their hold” (54).
Perhaps the monster is such a powerful image because he strikes so many archetypal chords for us:

He reenacts the history of human evolution and development—learns to speak, to read, to write by watching the closely knit, ideal family in the cottage.

He is an abandoned child—an orphan.

His character seems sometimes like Adam, sometimes like Satan, and even sometimes like Eve.
Oates asks, “How many creations of sheer language have stepped from the rhythms of their authors’ idiosyncratic voices into what might be called a collective cultural consciousness” (548)?

She argues that “The more potent the archetype evoked by a work of literature, the more readily its specific form slips free of the time-bound personal work. . . . [the archetypes] become communal creations; they belong to us all” (549).


--and the resonance of the novel reminds me of where we started—with Havel’s “Thriller.”