Exerpted from

**Narratives of Seduction and the Seductions of Narrative: The Frame Structure of *Frankenstein***

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*Frankenstein*, the reader will recall, contains [an elaborate series of frames](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Crit/struct.html). Working from the outside in we start with an epistolary narrative, the letters of a Captain Walton to his sister Mrs. Saville, who remains safely at home in England while he seeks fame, glory and the North Pole. His letters announce the discovery and rescue of a stranger -- Frankenstein -- who tells his bizarre story to Walton, who then includes it in his letters home. Frankenstein's story contains yet another, the confessions of the monstrous creature he has created and abandoned; and the Monster includes within his own narrative the story of the De Laceys, the family of exiles he tries pathetically and unsuccessfully to adopt as his own. As we pass from teller to teller, peeling back one story to discover another as though peeling an onion, we progress not only through time but also toward some goal that seems the more powerful and important for being so palpably *within*; it is as though we were moving toward the kernel that Marlow's tales refuse us. Put another way, this series of narratives creates the same kinds of expectations as those set in motion by what Roland Barthes has called the "hermeneutic code,"[6](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Articles/newmanb.html#6) but instead of being encoded in words alone -- in the "lexia" -- the presence of some enigma is signalled by the layering of stories, by the system of frames.

Though we receive this Chinese box of stories-within-stories in the form of writing, the packet of letters that Walton sends his sister, most of what we read is Walton's transcription of [two oral narratives](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Themes/narrate.html). In this respect *Frankenstein*, with its roots in the novels and romances of the previous century, takes a hackneyed convention and turns it nearly inside out. Instead of an editor producing a (supposedly) found manuscript, an already written document, Walton turns oral narratives into writing. Unlike the narratives he transcribes, Walton's letters to his sister are addressed to someone absent from the narrative situation, someone removed in time and place. This is only another way of saying that they are written, not spoken, but it reveals something important about how the outermost layer of narration differs from the others: Mrs. {145} Saville, safe at home in England, is cut off from the chain of narratives and the dangers they pose. But what are their dangers, and what do they have to do with the opposition of speech and writing? As we shall see, the dangers are in the seductiveness of narrative, particularly narratives that are literally given voice.

When Frankenstein first boards Walton's ship, the cold, hunger and exhaustion he has suffered in his search for the Monster have deprived him of [speech](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Themes/language.html), but as he regains this faculty he begins to insinuate himself very quickly into Walton's heart. In a letter to his sister Walton praises Frankenstein's gentleness and wisdom, but what impresses him most is something else: "When he speaks, although his words are culled with the choicest art, yet they flow with rapidity and unparalleled eloquence" ([27](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1831v1/flet46.html)).[7](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Articles/newmanb.html#7) Frankenstein's fluency as a speaker makes him almost divine in Walton's eyes ([210](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1831v3/fwal02.html)), and Walton is not alone in being moved by Frankenstein's powers of oratory: "Even the sailors feel the power of his eloquence; when he speaks, they no longer despair: he rouses their energies, and while they hear his voice they believe these vast mountains of ice are mole-hills which will vanish before the resolutions of man" ([213](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1831v3/fwal05.html)). But Walton suggests that Frankenstein's eloquence -- his fluency with words and his ability to manipulate language -- is only part of what makes him persuasive; its effects upon his men last only "while they hear his voice." There is something spellbinding in that alone; as long as Frankenstein speaks, Walton and his crew cannot choose but hear.[8](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Articles/newmanb.html#8) Its effects are even more profound upon Walton, who imagines that he can hear Frankenstein's "full-toned voice swell[ing] in my ears" long after it has ceased, and that his sister, when she reads his transcription of Frankenstein's story, will not be moved as much as he, "who hear[s] it from his own lips" ([31](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1831v1/flet49.html)). Like the [Ancient Mariner](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Coleridg/mariner.html)'s glittering eye, Frankenstein's voice compels attention -- but it does so without seeming to compel, wooing its listeners to receptivity through its richness and resonance.

*Frankenstein* raises the issue of the human voice in order to complicate it, and to call our attention to the [differences between reading a story and hearing one spoken aloud](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Themes/writing.html). It insists on a difference between the voice of Frankenstein and that of the Monster, which "though harsh, had nothing terrible in it" ([132](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1831v2/f2706.html)), but that difference is inaccessible to us as we read. We are more apt to be struck by the similarities in the way the Monster and Frankenstein {146} express themselves, since they both use the same kind of heightened language, and since both speak with an eloquence more expressive of a shared [Romantic ethos](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Contexts/romantic.html) than of differences in character. In fact, Walton's voice, the other significant voice in the text, is scarcely different. The novel fails to provide significant differences in tone, diction and sentence structure that alone can serve, in a written text, to represent individual human voices, and so blurs the distinction that it asks us to make between the voices of its characters.

Such differences in tone, diction and sentence structure have to do with another kind of voice than that with which we began; instead of voice in the physiological sense we are here concerned with voice in a textual sense. So conceived, voice is no longer the sensible medium of expression that lingers in Walton's ears but something more abstract. As a quasi-technical term often used to refer to properties of writing, voice is a metaphor that invokes precisely what is absent in the discourse to which it applies: the sounds produced by the organs of speech. Frame narratives, by giving the words of one speaker over to another, often force us to confront voice in this textual sense. Through an extended ventriloquism, a word-for-word repetition of another speaker's discourse, *Frankenstein* further blurs the distinctions between the voices of its narrators. That is, by transferring a given narrative from teller to teller, it complicates the question that most theories of narrative -- particularly those that stress point of view -- begin by asking: who is speaking?

*Frankenstein*, by juxtaposing three tendentious narratives, seems to encourage a point-of-view approach. It presents confessional first-person narrators whose stories sound the note of self-justification so loudly that they immediately invite suspicion, the kind of suspicion that point-of-view criticism teaches us to entertain. Each story is then transferred to a new teller who repeats it as an event in his own tale, which now serves as a frame. Putting such stories in someone else's mouth might seem to be a way of distancing the reader from a narrator so that we can see through the story he tells; framing might seem to provide a perspective that heightens the distance. That is, it might seem that the purpose of a narrative technique that transfers a story from teller to teller is to direct the reader to questions of point of view, and more specifically to questions of reliability and unreliability. But {147} each teller in the chain of narrative embeddings accepts the story he hears without question, and repeats it unchanged. As a result, we are given no new perspective; we are instead offered a series of stories that corroborate one another, in a sameness of voice that blurs the distinctions between tellers instead of heightening them. The frame structure of *Frankenstein* thus suggests that "point of view" is not the point at all. In fact, the logic of *Frankenstein* violates the main premise of point-of-view criticism by suggesting that its narratives are not expressions of individual human psyches. In other words, a story is emphatically separable from the character who first tells it; once a narrative has been uttered, it exists as a verbal structure with its own integrity, and can, like myth, think itself in the minds of men (and women). Being infinitely repeatable in new contexts, it has achieved autonomy; it now functions as a text, having been severed from its own origins, divested of its originating voice. The mark of this severance is the frame itself.[9](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Articles/newmanb.html#9)

The mutual independence of story and character becomes visible and problematic in *Frankenstein* in an episode that seems otherwise marginal, even digressive. This is the story of Justine, the young woman who (like Elizabeth Lavenza, Frankenstein's sister-bride) was adopted into the Frankenstein household while still a child. In terms of plot, Justine is merely functional, introduced only to be quickly killed off. We hear of her for the first time in a letter Frankenstein receives from Elizabeth after he has created the Monster and long after he has finished describing his family life. Elizabeth spends four paragraphs reminding Frankenstein who Justine is. To a lengthy summary of Justine's life story Elizabeth appends a significant *non sequitur* about "darling William," the baby of the Frankenstein clan, and closes her letter with a spate of gossipy details, a whole can of red herrings served up to distract us from the fishy digression the narrative has just taken. The importance to the plot of this apparent digression eventually becomes clear: Mary Shelley is setting up the first of the monster's murders -- the murder of William -- for which Justine will soon be found guilty. But as we read this, the narrative machinery itself begins to creak and groan; we sense that it is making itself ready for an event that hasn't yet been prepared. This hitch in the works is doubly marked, not only by the way the narrative changes direction here, but also by Elizabeth's being forced, briefly, into the {148} unidiomatic (if theoretically possible) voice of second-person narration: "'Justine, you may remember, was a great favourite of yours'" she writes ([65](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1831v1/f1503.html)).[10](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Articles/newmanb.html#10)Curiously, just as the coherence of *Frankenstein* threatens to dissolve into a peculiar narrative ineptness it is preparing us for [Justine's trial](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Themes/justice.html), an episode about narratives that fail to cohere. Moreover, by dispersing the story of Justine's innocence across multiple voices, the novel enacts the division of voice and character that is suggested by its frames.

In a sense, narrative itself is implicated in Justine's troubles. In the first place, the evidence that links Justine to the murder is circumstantial, which means that it assumes a narrative form: a series of apparently related events is distributed into a pattern of cause and effect, and so into a single, coherent plot; this plot, being narratable, is plausible, and being plausible begins to seem true. Thus the discovery upon Justine of a miniature stolen from the murdered William tells a story that ends in Justine's guilt. Further, what finally condemns Justine is precisely her inability to counter that story with a coherent narrative of her own. From the first, the only account she can give of herself is "confused and unintelligible" ([82](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1831v1/f1702.html)). When she is called to the witness stand in her own defence, she refuses to plead her case with studied eloquence, with careful rhetoric: "'I do not pretend that my protestations should acquit me; I rest my innocence on a plain and simple explanation of the facts which have been adduced against me'" ([82](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1831v1/f1702.html)). But is precisely because she cannot explain these facts -- that is, because they remain from her point of view, unnarratable -- that she is found guilty.