**Reality and Fiction Intersect in *The Face of a Monster, America’s Frankenstein***

**Patricia Earnest Suter 6 May 2018**

*Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* had an official release date of March 11, 1818, but author Mary Shelley first conceived the idea of her monster in 1816. \* She could not have known but fifty years later, immigrant Anton Probst became a monster who briefly terrorized Philadelphia. Due to a life of turmoil, neglect, loneliness, and poverty, Shelley worked through her angst and created one of the most enduring fictional monsters. Due to an impoverished life in a war-torn nation, the other became the monster.

*The Face of a Monster: America’s Frankenstein* (FOAM) was written to showcase the fun but occasionally eerie, parallels between fact and fiction and fact or Mary Shelley and her monster’s story and Anton Probst. I wrote FOAM to showcase the uncanny world that exists at the intersection and overlap of fact and fiction. I hope you enjoy! Patricia Earnest Suter

The following are just some of the comparisons showcased in FOAM:

Somewhat prophetically, Mary Shelley had written about German-speaking\* peoples “….Twere easier for God to make entirely new men than attempt to purify monsters such as these.” Anton Probst was from a German-speaking part of Europe.

Tragically, personal connections eluded Mary Shelley—often because those she loved were taken by death. 20 years after *Frankenstein’s* publication, Mary Shelley wrote, “My total friendlessness & want of connection….my being poor…all this has sunk me in a state of loneliness no other human being ever before, I believe endured—except Robinson Crusoe.” Like many other young men of the period, Probst left his home hoping to find fortune in America. Because of vices, Probst was always poor. Probst never developed any connections or friendships, beyond those he purchased.

Prior to leaving her turbulent childhood home, Mary often suffered illness. One manifested as a stealing paralysis which affected her arms and hands. This was believed to be psychosomatic. The paralysis disappeared once she escaped her home. Probst is thought to have self-mutilated to escape his unit during the American Civil War. Through either accident or exhaustion, Probst shot off his right thumb.

When the Frankenstein monster happened upon the De Lacey family, his circumstances and understanding of the world changed. When Probst happened upon the Dearing family, a hardworking Irish immigrant family who proved that with a good work ethic, immigrants might succeed. Probst’s circumstances and understanding of his world also changed.

As the Godwins and Shelleys were often impoverished, they lived in parts of London which were near prisons, scenes of public execution, and slaughterhouses. Mary was interested in science and went to lectures which used the occasional corpse obtained from the prisons for demonstration. After the war, Probst ended up in Blockley. It was a notorious almshouse in a squalid area of Philadelphia. Probst witnessed the despair caused by poverty and probably saw the bodies of the poor being carted away for scientific use, little knowing it was but foreshadowing.

Spring, but especially April, brought misfortune to the group of writers who had met in 1816 at Villa Diodati. As an example, Mary had finally started to bond with her father when he grew ill. William Godwin died on April 7, 1836. Thirty years after Godwin’s death, the Dearing family looked forward to the return of spring. Unfortunately, April 7, 1866, brought only terror. Six members of the Dearing family lost their lives, including four children. Additionally, the lives of indentured servant Cornelius Carey and cousin Elizabeth Dolan became forfeit. The murders on the Dearing farm became known as Philadelphia’s first mass murder.

Fannie Imlay, Mary’s stepsister, committed suicide in 1816. William Godwin feared a scandal and asked the family to stay quiet. He did not retrieve Imlay’s body from the city and she was buried in anonymity. Much of what is known about Imlay, is relayed by what is known about her relations. Cousin Elizabeth Dolan’s fate was similar as she was relegated to anonymity.

After Henry Clerval’s murder in *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein raised his childhood friend to a new importance. Seventeen-year-old indentured servant Cornelius Carey received the same treatment by correspondents. Although he was the first victim, he became the family’s protector. He would have saved the family if the monster had but given him a chance.

In *Frankenstein*, William Frankenstein was the monster’s first victim. Many believe Shelley based the character on her son, William. Mary Shelley had five children, only one of those children survived to see adulthood—Percy Florence Shelley. Julia Dearing had five children. Only one of those survived to see adulthood—William Dearing.

After Clerval’s murder, Victor Frankenstein grew alarmed by a number of less-than-friendly villagers who soon surrounded him. In Boris Karloff’s movie version of *Frankenstein*, the monster is beset upon by angry villagers. Frenzied villagers become a character in their own right. After Probst’s arrest, he was often accosted and set upon by large groups of angry Philadelphians. The police created ruses to fool the hordes.

Part of the allure of *Frankenstein* is that the monster is not the sole monster. Victor Frankenstein abandoned his progeny—an action some find almost more horrendous than the abandoned creature’s actions. The same argument can be made in Philadelphia. During Probst’s incarceration, the Dearing farm was overrun by those seeking souvenirs. Although the relic-seekers wore human guises, their actions were monstrous.

As an infant, William Godwin had Mary’s head examined by a physiognomist. She was labeled intelligent but irritable. Lord Byron’s brain was sensationalized because it was 25% larger than the average male brain. Similarly, phrenologists found Probst’s skull, and the brain it contained, fascinating. Probst’s skull was examined and the results were printed in newspaper articles and phrenological magazines. Probst had the skull of a “degraded” character. In one essay, his head elicited a discussion of “organic quality.” Probst’s skull was compared to that of Reverend F. W. Robertson, a close friend of Lady Anne Isabella (Milbanke) Byron, Lord Byron’s widow.

Much of the *Frankenstein* story is told through letters written by Captain Walton to his sister. Walton provides information about the other characters, which they cannot give. Sadly, it is through Probst and his confessions, that two of his victim’s last words are a matter of record. In that fashion, Probst became a narrator for his victims.

Victor assembled his monster from a confusion of body parts. A jolt of electricity gave the Frankenstein monster life. A jolt of electricity did not bring Probst back to life, but researchers gave the effort their all. After his execution, Probst was reduced to a confusion of parts. These parts ended up in Philadelphia, New York, and even Kentucky. After death, the bodies of those in England were often moved. Similarly, the bodies of the victims from the Dearing farm did not remain in one place.

Some claim the Villa Diodati group were cursed due to a spate of tragedy. Although no curse is known in reference to the victims of the Dearing farm, one dances around serial-killer H.H.Holmes. The gravesite of the Philadelphia victims is mere footsteps from that of the notorious serial killer. Maybe the Holmes curse did not begin with Holmes, but with Probst, for the two killers shared commonalities.

Ultimately, Shelley’s monster felt despair and lamented his oneness--his excuse to destroy the Frankenstein family. Once Probst was executed, his own uniqueness was described in *The New York Times*, “He was not a man, he was a *sui generis* a—PROBST.”

For these, and many more parallels, read *The Face of a Monster: America’s Frankenstein*. Available on Amazon, IngramSpark, Barnes and Noble, Powell’s Books, Foyles, other fine bookstores or contact the author at [patriciaearnestsuter@gmail.com](mailto:patriciaearnestsuter@gmail.com).

\*Official release date March 11, 1818. For the sake of FOAM, the author used the expanded 1831 edition.

\*Germany was not yet a unified country