Mary Shelley's Varied Literary Techniques

Throughout *Frankenstein*, Shelley utilizes various literary techniques in order to enhance the novel in different respects. Instead of simply writing a novel about a large ugly monster that ravages humanity, Shelley develops a clever plot by adding in different roles, themes and character traits. A jaded novel would be unappealing to the reader. A complex plot along with developed characters and themes grabs his or her attention. Similarly, Shelley uses literary devices, such as imagery, foreshadowing and perspective change, as a means of making the story appealing to the reader, spurring interest and invoking imagination.

Mary Shelley frequently uses imagery in order to give a detailed description of the different exotic locations. While Shelley uses various sensory images for description of scenery, she also uses them as a method of describing the character’s feelings. For example, when Walton describes the climate of Petersburg in his first letter to his sister, he describes the slowly cooling of weather. While he “walks in the streets of Petersburg” he “feel[s] a cold northern breeze play upon [his] cheeks” that “braces [his] nerves and fills [him] with delight” (Shelley 1). Shelley uses the same idea with Frankenstein. When Frankenstein lives on a desolate island to create his second monster, Frankenstein describes the view outside his laboratory using sensory images. He tells how “the sea...was almost motionless, for the winds were hushed, and all nature reposed under the eye of the quiet moon” (Frankenstein 145). While Shelley does give an account of how the moon and the sea look, she also shows how Frankenstein uses the view from the beach as an escape from his toils of creating a monster. While describing the cold breeze and the temperature using sensory images, Shelley also describes how this makes Walton feel rather than simply stating that the weather is cold. In other situations, Shelley uses imagery to describe the scene. When Frankenstein travels to the Swiss Alps, he illustrates “the abrupt sides of vast mountains” and “a few shattered spines” as the “glorious presence – chamber of imperial nature was broken only by the brawling waves or the fall of some vast fragment” and even “the thunder sound of the avalanche” (Shelley 78). Frankenstein’s detailed description helps the reader visualize the scene clearly in their mind as well as the surrounding sounds and the texture of nearby objects. Altogether, Shelley uses imagery as a tool for describing the setting as well as a method to dwell into character’s feelings.

While she uses imagery as a means of depicting scenery, Shelley constantly uses foreshadowing as a means of helping the reader understand the plot, building suspense, and strengthening motifs and themes. If Shelley had not used foreshadowing throughout the novel, the story would have become jaded and the reader would have discontinued the novel. For example, when Walton reflects on his lack of companionship at the beginning of the novel, Shelley suggests that Walton will receive a friend more desolate than himself. Walton suggests that he “ha[s] no friend” and that when he “is glowing with the enthusiasm of success, there will be none to participate [his] joy” (Shelley 4). Conversely, if he is “assailed by disappointment, no one will endeavor to sustain [him] in rejection” (Shelley 4). Although Walton conjectures that he is alone and that no one will come to support him, he reveals to the reader that someone will come to end his sorrow, someone lonelier than himself. At the very beginning of the novel, the reader may have been confused if Walton was the man that created the monster and Frankenstein the monster he created. However, by adding in Walton’s feelings about his lack of companionship, Shelley helps the reader understand that the story is merely told in Walton’s perspective. In other instances, Shelley uses foreshadowing as a method of adding suspense to the story. When Frankenstein and Elizabeth travel to Villa Lavenza, Frankenstein reveals that “those were the last moments of my life during which I enjoyed the feeling of happiness” (Shelley 170). Also, Frankenstein constantly alludes to the monster’s sentence that “[he] will be on [his] wedding night” (Shelley 146). Instead of surprisingly revealing the death of Elizabeth on their honeymoon, Shelley adds the notion of Elizabeth’s immediate death to keep the suspense in the story and keep the reader’s attention. The monster had already told Frankenstein that “[he] will be there on [his] wedding night” (Shelley 146), but the reader, seeing the happiness of Elizabeth and Frankenstein while they traveled to their Villa, may have thought that Frankenstein will kill the monster before he kills Elizabeth. Nevertheless, Frankenstein ends any skepticism that he lives happily ever after. If he never lives happily ever after, he therefore loses Elizabeth and most likely the rest of his family. In order to clear confusion, build suspense and develop themes and motifs, Shelley uses the literary device of foreshadowing.

Although Shelley frequently uses foreshadowing throughout the novel, she changes the point of view of the story, to make the novel interesting for the reader and describe the different emotions of different characters. Shelley does this by beginning the narration in a sailor’s, named Robert Walton, perspective. After narrating his beginning experiences upon traveling to the North Pole, Walton sees Frankenstein nearly about to die. In his description of Frankenstein, Walton describes his body as “nearly frozen...and deadly emaciated by fatigue and suffering” and Walton had never seen “a man in so wretched a condition” (Shelley 10). Instead of making a novel where Frankenstein talks directly to the reader, Shelley incorporates Walton’s letters to his sister to grab the reader’s attention and introducing the motif of letter writing in the novel. While keeping the story in the writings of Walton, Shelley then transitions to Frankenstein’s narrative. After beginning to bond with Walton, Frankenstein decides to “commence his narrative the next day” (Shelley 10) and tell Walton his whole life story. Obviously, Shelley does this to develop the plot and tell the story of the monster. However, Shelley, instead of keeping the story in Walton’s perspective, adds Frankenstein’s point of view to add
emotion and additional description to keep the reader’s attention. Frankenstein once tells how he “past the night wretchedly” (Shelley 43) and how he “felt the palpitation of every artery” (Shelley 43). In another instance, after Frankenstein learns his monster killed William, his “teeth chattered” and “no one could conceive the anguish I suffered during the remainder of the night” (Shelley 60). While still keeping the story in letters to Walton’s sister, Shelley cleverly is able to add Frankenstein’s emotion and experiences through his own voice. Finally, Shelley is able to add the monster’s perspective of the story, while still maintaining the narrative of Frankenstein and the letters of Walton, to add the monster’s input as a contrast to Frankenstein’s. Throughout the part narrated by Frankenstein, the reader has only listened to Frankenstein’s constant verbal abusive of his creation. To give sympathy for the monster as well as develop the doppelganger of Frankenstein and the monster, Shelley adds in his perspective. When the monster learns how to speak and write French from Agatha, Safie, Felix and De Lacy, as well as understand basic knowledge and communication between humans, he becomes so fond of them he decides to meet them in person to confer thanks to his teachers. However the cottagers never actually saw the monster and taught him involuntarily. So the first time they saw the monster, “Agatha fainted, and Safie...rushed out of the college” while “Felix darted forward and... tore me from his father...he dashed me to the ground and struck me with a stick” (Shelley 115). While the monster easily “could have torn him limb from limb”, “his heart sank with within...with bitter sickness, and [he] refrained” (Shelley 115). Not only does the reader learn that the monster would never be able to have a relationship with any human, other than Frankenstein, the monster has qualities of companionship, love and happiness like any other human. By showing the monster’s human like qualities, Shelley allows the reader to sympathize with him because it shows how he justifies his killings. Furthermore, Shelley skillfully uses different points of view to make the story interesting, display the emotions of Frankenstein and give the reader an ability to sympathize with the monster and develop the doppelganger of Frankenstein and the monster.

In summary, Shelley constantly uses different literary techniques, including imagery, foreshadowing, and perspective change, as a means of upholding the interest of the reader. For imagery, Shelley adds detailed description, enhancing the reader’s ability to visualize the scene in their mind while adding in the character’s feelings. Shelley’s use of foreshadowing, while building suspense, helps the reader understand confusing aspects of the story by telling what happens in the future, and builds already strong themes and motifs. Finally, by changing the perspective or narration, Shelley makes both the plot interesting and adds emotion to the story. The usage of various techniques solidifies the reader’s interest in the novel because they make the story more complex and interesting to read.

Works Cited