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**Mary Shelley and the Tradition of Realism**

**Introduction**

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley is a Romantic-era novelist and the wife of a great Romantic poet [Percy Bysshe Shelley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Percy_Bysshe_Shelley). She is famous for writing Gothic novel. George Levine has written a commentary book on her works with the name *Frankenstein and The Tradition of Realism*. The premise of the analysis book discusses that English literature had always been under the influence of poetry until the Victorian era when the *Realists* gave it a new direction: the novel. Poetry always dominated the literature from *Classic* to *Romantic* age. Great litterateurs of Britain i.e. Milton, Chaucer, Wordsworth, and Keats were all the poets. This influence was such strong that even the great playwright William Shakespeare used to write the dialogues in poetic style and he was a great poet. The subject matter of the literature was always a deity, noble, highborn or a royal person i.e. king, queen, prince, or princess. William Wordsworth is credited with recognizing the importance of poor or rustic people for literature. He was followed by his contemporaries for this feature, but the most effective mode of expression was still poetry. The Realists introduced novel as a new mode of expression in the literature and started writing about the lives of common people. Mary Shelley although belongs to the Romantic era, but her novels especially Frankenstein is rich with all the features which are the specialty of Realist novels. Thus, George Levine concludes that the realist features must be analyzed in the literature produced before the Victorian era, and the term Realism should not be bound by the chronological peripheries. This analysis is of high importance and although some points are agreeable and the others are not.

**Body**

One agreement with the core premises of the analysis is that Mary Shelley looks advance than her contemporaries when she chooses fiction to express her ideas rather than poetry albeit she was living with great poets of the era like P.B. Shelley and Lord Byron. Her fiction is similar to the Realists fiction. Before discussing the similarities between her work and the Victorian era novel, it is useful to have an overview of the Realist fiction. The genre of Realism is dedicated to portraying the actual-world experiences. The readers find a reference to the literature in their surroundings. The characters are much familiar to the common readers. It is believed that the Industrial Revolution was the motivating force behind the emergence of this genre. Industrial Revolution enabled the common rustic people to migrate to cities and a diverse society developed as the result of *urbanization*. The cities began to become overcrowded where individual issues started to become complex. Apart from that, the Victorian values left the women inside the four walls and men were supposed to work outdoor. A large number of women turned idle at home with nothing significant to do. Defined roles and even dress codes were followed strictly in the society by both men and women. It caused the emergence of what we call the Victorian novel, which was the expression of common citizen issues. One of the most important realists was Charles Dickens who was a journalist as well. He stressed upon writing about the daily experiences of common citizens without adding any romanticism or imaginary elements. The half British population which was based upon women who were idle sitting at home found refuge in reading interesting novels and comparing the stories with their daily life experiences. Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice* is a fine example of the Victorian Realist novel. It portrays the lives of four sisters who are all ready to marry and looking for their husbands. The novel highlights a grave issue of the women of contemporary England. All the story looks like a biography which is written without any metaphysical elements. Every girl of contemporary England could relate the novel with her life as all the common people were familiar with the ideas and experiences in the novel. The Realist heroes do not dream or attempt to do a historical adventure rather their focus is upon their issues and they strive to survive in that Bourgeoisie controlled society.

Frankenstein justifies Levine’s argument in the sense that Victor Frankenstein is an ordinary citizen who is striving to live a peaceful life with his family. His intentions are not to change the course of history rather he does what he does for the sake of personal satisfaction. He is an ordinary but educated person who has learned philosophy and chemistry. Being a scientist he experiments to find the secret of life. He appears successful in this exploration and creates a creature using dead body parts, the creature turns a horrible monster. He asks Frankenstein to make a soul mate for him but when he is denied, the monster rebels. Frankenstein creates another female monster but then he kills her conjecturing that they both might create fuss after unification (Levine, George. N.P). The story is related to a few individuals rather than dominating a village, city, or state. A struggle for revenge continues and the monster kills Frankenstein’s brother who is also an ordinary citizen. The monster continues and kills Frankenstein’s friend and his new wedded bride. Both the rivals die eventually, and their deaths have no significance for the people other than Frankenstein's relatives and Captain Robert Walton whom Frankenstein tells the story. While the novel presents the life of a few ignoble or ordinary members of English society. The core theme of the analysis of the premises seems true when we look at the novel using this prism of Realism.

Levine appears overgeneralizing Realism when all the features of Realism are analyzed with reference to the novel Frankenstein. A disagreement with the core theme of the premise is that although the protagonist of the novel is an ordinary person who is in the exploration of new ideas and knowledge whole the novel is not in harmony with the Realist ideas. The Realists highly disregard super-natural elements in literature. They write and encourage literature written about very real issues of common citizens. *Pride and Prejudice,* as discussed above, was solely about the lives of four sisters and their struggle to find husbands. The other fine example of a Victorian novel is Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* that revolves around the lives of ordinary people. The other features of Victorian novels are that they are thickly plotted and crowded with characters, as we see in *Pride and Prejudice* where every chapter introduces new characters. This feature is absent from Shelley’s novel. There are only a few characters and the plot is not thickly plotted rather it is like S.T.Coleridge’s poem *The Rime of Ancient Mariner.* Frankenstein is found in ill condition by Captain Walton and he reveals the whole story as the Ancient Mariner tells his story to the guys who were going to attend a marriage ceremony.

 Levine's analysis is not useless rather much useful and appreciable work because it has explored some features of Realism in the literature produced before this era started. He has enabled the reader to analyze the pre-Realism literature and explore its features in that. The Realists are credited, not wrongly, with highlighting the personal issues of common individuals, but there are some other examples in the literature produced before this era where the writers have given importance to ordinary and common people regarding them as the topic of writing. Levine’s analysis encouraged me and I found that Henry Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews (1742),* that was published five score years before Realism, can be considered the finest example of this genre. It is the story about the adventures of a poor lad Joseph Andrews and his parson friend Abraham Adams. Their adventures are not heroic rather ordinary life experiences that they overcome. The end of the play is also very simple as Joseph Andrews marries his beloved Fanny Goodwill. There are supernatural elements in the novel and the novel presents the true picture of 18th century England. The abundance of characters is also the feature of Realism. I appreciate Levine's analysis to make me learn more than what is written.

**Conclusion**

George Levine has written an interesting analysis and his commentary has caused new research in the field of literature. His claim that Realism is not confined to the era when the term was in use rather it had its existence in literature far before the Victorian era. He has argued using examples from past literature and proved that Realism cannot be shackled in chronological peripheral chains. His focus of the study was the novel Frankenstein by Mary Shelley and he explored many Realist features in this Romantic novel. The premise of the book *Frankenstein and The Tradition of Realism encouraged* me to read and analyze more literature in consideration of Realism. I also found that Joseph Andrews is rich with Realist features and can be called a Realist novel as per the definition of Realism.

**Works Cited**

Levine, George. "Frankenstein" and the Tradition of Realism." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*. Vol. 7. No. 1. Duke University Press, 1973.