Frankenstein

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*Frankenstein***was dreamed up (literally) by Mary Shelley while she was staying in Switzerland in 1816. This was a time of great scientific, political and social change. Knowledge of these developments, and Shelley's eventful life, will help you understand the novel:**

**Mary Shelley**

Born in 1797, Mary was the daughter of William Godwin - a famous writer with *revolutionary* ideas - and Mary Wollstonecraft, herself a writer and arguably the world's first feminist.

Her mother died days after giving birth to her - the first of many tragedies in Shelley's life. Some of these tragedies would later inspire events in *Frankenstein*.

In 1812, Mary met the poet Percy Shelley. Percy and his wife Harriet were frequent visitors to the London home of Mary's father.

Mary ran off to France with Percy in 1814. She gave birth to his child in 1815 - but the baby died just 12 days later.

Harriet drowned herself in 1816, allowing Percy to marry Mary soon after. The general public was outraged.

After coming up with the idea for her novel in Switzerland, *Frankenstein* was published two years later in 1818 - Mary was still only 20.

Mary's second son, William, died aged three in 1821.

Percy drowned in 1822.

Mary and Percy's great friend, the writer and poet Lord Byron, died in 1824. Mary was devastated by this, and the loneliness caused by the death of so many of her friends and family.

Mary died in 1851. Although she wrote many other books, none matched the success of *Frankenstein*.

**Age of revolution**

Mary Shelley was born into a world of scientific, artistic and political *revolution*. Her father and husband were famous radical thinkers and writers, and both of them (along with other important *philosophers* of the day) had a large influence on Mary and her novel.

One of her father's main ideas was that everyone should act only for the good of mankind; otherwise, selfishness would lead to the breakdown of society. This view influenced Frankenstein in that Victor largely thinks and acts only for himself, ignoring the wishes of the Monster (for example, by not creating a wife for it), thereby endangering mankind by giving it a reason to do harm. Victor is also a bad parent, deserving punishment for abandoning his creature.

Many people see this book as promoting the *revolutionary* ideas that dominated the political world at the time, since Victor challenges authority (God) by creating life himself. The Monster is also revolutionary in its hostility towards authority (its 'father'). Yet both the Monster and Victor are punished with death - leading other people to conclude that Shelley is critical of political revolution.

When writing this book, Mary was influenced by the scientific revolution of the time. She had heard about one man, Galvani, who had supposedly re-animated dead tissue, and another, Aldini, who had wired up a criminal's corpse to a battery so that his jaw appeared to move and a fist to clench. Such discoveries were discussed at the holiday home of the Shelleys in the weeks before Frankenstein was written.

**Literary background**

The most important literary style to influence the novel was *Gothic horror*. Mary said her story was born out of long days and nights on holiday with Percy, Byron and another friend, when persistent rain had kept them indoors with only the works of German Gothic writers for amusement. This led to the idea of a ghost-story contest, for which the young Mary wrote her initial draft, inspired by a nightmare she'd had. The Gothic features of the story include its horrific descriptions, use of overpowering emotions and exotic, often remote, settings.

Other writers to influence Mary were Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who had read his poem The Rime of the Ancient Mariner to Mary when she was four. She later remembered being terrified by this, but used similar themes of discovery and isolation in her story. Another poem, Paradise Lost by John Milton, also inspired her. In Frankenstein, the Monster compares himself to the main character, Satan (the devil).

**Literary Focus**

Set at the end of the 18th century, Frankenstein is told in the first person by three different narrators: the explorer Robert Walton, scientist Victor Frankenstein, and the unnamed Monster. The book is written in the form of letters from Walton to his sister back in England, re-telling events told to him after rescuing Frankenstein in the Arctic. By using the device of a letter-writing narrator, Mary Shelley gives the book a sense of realism that helps the audience to imagine that these fantastical events really occurred.

**Letters I - IV**

Robert Walton tells of both his family history and hopes for the highly dangerous expedition he has embarked upon. He meets Victor Frankenstein shortly after seeing a creature 'of gigantic stature' on an ice raft speed away from his ship, which has become trapped in ice somewhere in the Arctic.

Victor is very ill and is looked after by Walton, who has complained in his letters of not having a companion to share his feelings. As the two become friends, Victor begins his tale; one he hopes will be a warning to Walton about the dangers of ambition and the pursuit of knowledge. Walton says he will write down everything his friend tells him.

**Chapters 1-3: Bereavement**

Victor has a very happy childhood, brought up by a wealthy and caring family in Geneva, Switzerland. He adores, and is adored by, his foster sister, Elizabeth, and has another great friend in Henry Clerval.

However, tragedy strikes when his mother dies of fever just before he leaves to study at the University of Ingolstadt. His father insists he should still go, and while at university Victor's earlier interest in science becomes an obsession - in particular, he wants to discover the secret of life itself.

**Chapters 4-5: Determination**

Victor cuts himself off from his friends and does not see his family for years. He becomes ill through work, not helped by visiting graveyards at night to dig up bodies he later experiments on. All this effort pays off, though, when he finally discovers a way to give life to dead objects.

Victor manages to construct a creature made of huge body parts stolen from a number of different graves, and brings it to life 'on a dreary night of November'. He is immediately disgusted by it and what he has done. He abandons the creature, assuming it will die of neglect. Victor then falls further into illness himself, before being rescued by the arrival of Clerval, who looks after him in the following weeks.

**Chapters 6-9: Vigilance**

Victor recovers and becomes more like his old, happy self. He stops his scientific experiments, takes up new studies, and goes on holiday with Clerval.

In a letter from Elizabeth, he learns that the 'very clever and gentle, and extremely pretty' Justine Moritz has become a greatly loved servant of his family, and that his youngest brother William (four) is 'rosy with health'.

But just before he finally returns to home Geneva, six years after he left, Victor hears of William's murder. On arriving, he sees the Monster lit up by lightning during a thunderstorm and rightly guesses it was to blame. However, he knows no-one will believe him if he says so.

Moritz is put on trial for the murder and soon executed. Victor admits to Walton that both she and William are "the first hapless (unlucky) victims of my *unhallowed* (evil) arts".

**Chapter 10: Despair**

The Monster and Victor meet for the first time since it was created, and Victor tries to kill it out of revenge. But the Monster dodges the attack, and then asks to talk and explain its actions. It wants Victor to admit some responsibility and show sympathy for what it has gone through, thanks to Victor abandoning it.

The Monster is calm and restrained, and speaks politely with great skill and persuasion. Victor curses, calls it 'Devil', and is openly violent in his words and attempted deeds. This irony shows that Shelley wants the audience to sympathize with the Monster. The chapter ends with the Monster hinting to Victor that it will leave mankind alone if he agrees to listen to its story. Grudgingly, Victor accepts.

**Chapters 11-16: Friendship**

The Monster tells of how it has suffered terribly at the hands of man, mainly because of its appearance - something it cannot be blamed for. It learnt how to speak and read while spying on the De Laceys as they taught a foreign visitor (Safie) their language.

De Lacey, a blind old man, shows kindness towards the Monster. His son misinterprets the Monster's intentions and throws it out of their cottage. This deeply affects the Monster, who weeps and grieves over the loss of its hovel and (unknowing) companions. This grief quickly becomes a desire for revenge on mankind when, after saving a peasant girl from drowning, the Monster is shot at and wounded.

The Monster explains that it believed it could make friends with a child, someone who would not be old enough to be prejudiced against it. It tells of how it then came across young William and approached him in a friendly way, only to be insulted and abused yet again. On hearing the boy say his father was called Frankenstein, a name it knew to be that of its creator, it strangled him to death. Finally, it pleads with Victor to build it a wife, a companion it can run away with to the 'vast wilds of South America' and never trouble mankind again.

**Chapters 17-19: Regret**

After some debate, Victor agrees to the Monster's request to build a second creature, on the condition it keeps to its "solemn oath to quit Europe… and every other place in the neighborhood of man". Victor is miserable at the thought of what he must go through again. His family put this depression down to his grief at William's death.

Weeks later, Victor has still not started work on the new creature, due to fear of what might happen and being discovered at his gruesome task. He is still sad, and his father thinks an immediate marriage to Elizabeth will cheer him up. He tells his family he will travel to England before marrying, and his father sends him off with Clerval as a companion. They part company in Scotland, where Victor finally sets up a laboratory to complete his task on a remote island in the Orkneys.

**Chapters 20-22: Disbelief**

One moonlit night, on seeing the Monster grinning at his window as he works, Victor tears the half-built creature to pieces. The Monster howls in rage and utters the *ominous* words: "I shall be with you on your wedding night." It leaves, while Victor takes a boat out to sea to dump the remains of the unfinished creature. After doing so, he falls asleep and the boat drifts aimlessly.

Victor wakes up and lands on the Irish coast. He is immediately surrounded by angry strangers and accused of murder. He is taken to see a corpse and is devastated to discover it is Clerval. Two months of near-fatal fever follow, before his father arrives to look after him. After another month in prison, evidence is finally found to prove him not guilty and he is taken back to Geneva to marry Elizabeth.

**Chapters 22-24: Revenge**

Victor and Elizabeth marry at last, but Victor is reminded frequently of the Monster's threat to be with him on his wedding night (showing how self-absorbed he has become). A heavy rain storm is an *ominous* sign, as is the pistol Victor has hidden upon him.

Once night falls, Victor leaves Elizabeth to inspect the house where they are staying and to look for any sign of the Monster. While he is gone, the Monster finds Elizabeth, whose 'shrill and dreadful' scream brings Victor rushing back. He finds his wife dead on the bed with 'the murderous mark of the fiend's grasp' still on her neck. From his window, he sees the Monster grinning at him, an echo of when Victor destroyed its 'wife'.

Enraged and appalled at events, Victor finally tells a magistrate about the Monster. But it is too late. The magistrate does not believe his story, and says that, even if it were true, there is nothing ordinary men could do to such a powerful enemy.

Victor promises to take action himself and chases the Monster for months, north across Europe and Russia and towards the North Pole. When he appears to have lost track of his prey, or approaches starvation, it becomes clear the Monster has left signs or food for him. Just before catching up with it on an ice sledge, the ice cracks, the Monster escapes, and Victor is rescued by Walton.

**The last letters**

Walton concludes the story in a continuation of the earlier letters sent to his sister. These tell how Victor still encourages Walton and his crew to go on with their expedition, despite being trapped in ice with unknown perils ahead. It seems Victor has learnt nothing from the moral of his own story.

When the ice breaks, Walton agrees with his men's wishes to return home, although he is very sad at his failure. Near death, Victor asks Walton to kill the Monster if he comes across it, but he knows that this is now unlikely because the ship is heading away from the Pole.

He seems to have learnt his lesson when he tells Walton to 'avoid ambition'. However, his last words hint that someone else could succeed in creating life without the terrible consequences he has suffered, so he dies *unrepentant*.

Soon after, a noise attracts Walton to the cabin where Victor's body rests and he discovers the grieving Monster. It tells Walton it is sorry for what it has done, but also justified because of man's mistreatment of it. The Monster sees a hopeless life ahead and tells Walton it will kill itself in 'the agonies of torturing flames'. It then leaps off the ship and Walton watches as it heads off to its death, becoming 'lost in darkness and distance'.

**Character**

# Victor Frankenstein

* Victor Frankenstein comes from a wealthy, supportive family, which he neglects when he becomes overly absorbed in his studies at university.
* He is both extremely clever and *egotistical*. He is a star student, but wants to use his knowledge to obtain the god-like power of creating life.
* Victor often fails to listen to good advice from his friends, family and teachers. If he had, many deaths, including his own, may have been avoided.
* He rejects the Monster immediately after its creation, calling it a 'wretch' and leaving it to fend for itself. This shows how irresponsible he is. It is also another example of him neglecting his family, since the Monster sees him as its father.
* Victor is scared of owning up to what he has done. Even when his little brother, William, is killed by the Monster, he does not admit to knowing who the murderer is. If he had done this, Justine's life would have been saved.
* He is capable of showing sympathy for the Monster. For example, when it asks him to create a wife for it, so as not to be forever lonely, Victor at first agrees. However, he later destroys the half-built creature before the Monster's eyes. This leads to his own wife's murder on their wedding night.
* His desire for vengeance is very strong. He chases the Monster from Switzerland to the North Pole, enduring great hardships along the way.
* Before dying, Victor says his actions are not 'blameable', and that he still believes he was right to create the Monster. This lack of guilt, and his destructive pursuit of scientific knowledge for personal glory, makes us wonder if Victor is in fact the real monster of the story.

# The Monster

* Although Victor selects the Monster's body parts so that it will be beautiful, when it is given life it looks hideously ugly. This leads ordinary people to be scared of the Monster and mistreat it.
* The Monster is of good character, and does many kind things (for example, helping the De Laceys to harvest their crops and saving the peasant girl from drowning).
* It is turned bad through Victor's and other's mistreatment.
* The Monster lacks company and only ever wants friendship. This is why it asks Victor to build it a wife.
* It is very clever, learning to speak and read by secretly watching the De Laceys. Its speech is sophisticated and persuasive, helping us to have sympathy for it.
* Unlike Victor, the Monster regrets its bad actions at the end of the book.
* It also shows love for Victor at the end. Its last action is to commit suicide when it discovers its 'father' is dead.

# Robert Walton

* The main narrator of the story, Walton is an explorer on his way to find the North Pole when he meets Victor. On hearing Victor's story, he records it in a series of letters to his sister.
* He is similar to Victor in his passion for scientific discovery, ambition and desire for glory.
* He is also largely self-taught, another link with Victor.
* At first, Walton seems willing to sacrifice the men on his ship for the sake of his ambition. He is asked by Victor when they first meet: 'Do you share my madness?'
* Walton felt very lonely before meeting Victor, and they become good friends in the short time they spend together. He shares this loneliness and need for companionship with the Monster.
* When Victor dies Walton feels very sad and thinks about carrying out Victor's wish to find and kill the Monster. But when he discovers the Monster grieving over Victor's corpse he feels sorry for it.
* He learns from Victor's story the foolishness of great ambition, and turns back rather than continue his search for the Pole. This shows he is at last aware of other people and their safety, something Victor ignored.

# Elizabeth Lavenza

* Elizabeth is Victor's foster sister, an orphan brought up by Victor's parents. He calls her his 'more than sister'.
* She is beautiful, very caring, and loves Victor completely. She looks after him when he falls ill and acts as a mother figure to the younger children when Victor's mother dies.
* She has a great belief in justice and doing the right thing, but this is shattered first by the murder of William and then the execution of Justine.
* Her bravery is shown at Justine's trial, when she speaks up for her when other friends refuse to.
* When she is murdered by the Monster on her wedding night, her beauty and innocence are emphasized. This takes away a lot of sympathy for the Monster.

# Justine Moritz

* Like many female characters in the story, Justine is an orphan who cares for other people before herself.
* She is brought up in the Frankenstein family home, and acts as their servant.
* She is especially fond of Victor's youngest brother, William, and feels responsible when he is murdered by the Monster.
* Justine is very beautiful. This beauty angers the Monster when it finds her sleeping, as it knows it will never be allowed to love anyone so attractive. The Monster then places the locket around her neck, knowing it will lead to her being put on trial for the murder.
* She is bullied into confessing by a priest. Her calmness and virtue are emphasized and contrasted with the immorality of those who should know better - like Victor, the priest and the judge.

# The De Laceys

* De Lacey is an old, blind man who is looked after by his son (Felix) and daughter (Agatha). The family inspires the Monster with their love and kindness to each other, and to their exotic visitor, Safie.
* De Lacey was once a wealthy man, but Felix caused the family to be exiled from their native France and they now live in utter poverty. Despite this, De Lacey does not feel sorry for himself, nor show any anger towards Felix.
* The Monster sees this natural goodness in De Lacey and waits for a time to talk to him alone. De Lacey is the only character to ever show kindness to the Monster, and his blindness means he is not *prejudiced* towards it.
* Felix is *impetuous* and pre-judges the Monster. This leads to him beating it out of fear for his father's safety, causing it much distress. The Monster becomes exiled from the one family it thought might accept it. As a result, the Monster tells us: 'Evil thenceforth became my good'.

# Henry Clerval

* Clerval is Victor's best friend.
* He follows Victor to university at Ingolstadt, and cares for him when he becomes ill after creating the Monster.
* Victor never tells him about the Monster, though.
* Clerval is kind and generous, and loved by all who meet him. The Monster murders him, however, to get back at Victor, who has just destroyed its half-built 'wife'.

**Themes**

Frankenstein is not just a book about a man who creates a Monster. Mary Shelley intended her readers to learn from her tale. It contains many of her ideas on how people should behave. These were shaped by her upbringing, relationship with Shelley, and her reading of the works of many famous authors and philosophers. These ideas can be summed up in the main **themes** of the novel, namely **knowledge** and **discovery**, **justice**, **prejudice**, and **isolation**.

# Knowledge and discovery

The novel begins with Walton describing his own voyage of discovery, which he hopes will lead him to the North Pole. On meeting Victor, he hears of another tale of discovery, that of the secret of creating life itself.

The Monster is also on a path of self-discovery, and all three characters share a powerful desire to acquire knowledge - a desire that ultimately leads two of them to their deaths, and which very nearly kills Walton.

The Monster quite naturally seeks knowledge about where it came from and how to survive in a hostile world. Through patient *endeavor*, it learns how to speak and read. But the knowledge it gains only leads it to curse its existence.

It knows that it can never be accepted in the world of man, yet craves human company and the love of the father who abandoned it. Finally, through learning of the 'sanguinary (bloody) laws of man', the Monster is taught that it can be acceptable to kill in some circumstances. This knowledge leads to the deaths of many innocent people.

Robert Walton was brought up by his uncle, and is self-taught in the art of sea-faring. This is despite his father's dying wish that his uncle forbid him from embarking on a life at sea. His determination to succeed, shown by his willingness to work "harder than the common sailors during the day (and devote his) nights to the study of mathematics… medicine... and physical sciences", leads him to believe he can be the first to discover the sea passage to the North Pole. However, his real motivation is self-glory, fuelled by overwhelming ambition. This leads to him failing to assess the dangers of his voyage and knowingly putting the lives of his crew at risk.

Victor Frankenstein also puts others' lives at risk, as well as his own, through his ambitious pursuit of knowledge. He neglects his loving family and allows his health to suffer greatly in his obsession to discover the secret of creating life out of death.

Shelley makes it clear she believes knowledge such as this cannot lead to good. Some benefit may have come from finding a way to the North Pole, but no good is shown to come from Victor's creation of the Monster.

She shows Victor's 'success' to have severe and tragic consequences that should serve as a warning to scientists, past, present and future, that knowledge is a very dangerous thing and should only be used for the good of mankind - and certainly not personal gain.

# Justice

Through reading Victor's journal and the books found at the De Laceys, the Monster discovers it has been the victim of persistent *injustice*. Shelley makes it clear the Monster is one of many such victims. She wanted her audience to think about the injustices in her world, and perhaps do something about them.

The Monster suffers right from the start with Victor's flight from it, deserting his responsibilities as a 'father'. People in the 19th century would have seen this as a crime. Victor is punished with death by the novel's end.

But the Monster is also responsible for some terrible crimes, especially the murder of Elizabeth. It punishes itself by committing suicide. However, if people had been kinder, or at least less cruel, the Monster would have found acceptance and felt no need to exact revenge on a world it believed to be responsible for its *plight*.

Shelley, like her mother, was a firm believer in social justice: that we should look after everyone from all ranks of society, regardless of wealth or status. Perhaps it should not be a surprise, then, that the fairest, most decent characters are women. But they are punished by fate, a cruel God, the Monster or (ironically) the system of justice itself.

Victor's mother shows kindness in firstly taking in Elizabeth, then taking care of her when she falls ill with scarlet fever. An injustice is done to her, though, when she dies of the same disease after coaxing Elizabeth to a full recovery. Elizabeth then acts as a mother to the remaining family, marries her lifelong love, Victor, but is punished with death at the hands of the Monster.

Justine is a caring servant and loving guardian of William who unreasonably feels responsible when he is murdered. Her execution as a result of a forced conviction and unfair judge is a further example of the many injustices Shelley saw in the world around her. It is also ironic that the judicial system saves Victor when on trial for the murder of Clerval, when he is the guiltiest character in the story. Shelley could not be clearer: justice is blind, the world is unjust.

# Prejudice

Prejudice, or judging people with little or no evidence, is a recurring theme throughout Frankenstein. The first major incidence of it comes when Victor abandons his creature. Worse, when he wakes to see it reach out to him just hours after its 'birth', Victor assumes it means harm. In fact, it is simply the natural action of a 'child' reaching out for its 'parent'.

People who come across the Monster are all deceived by its appearance into thinking it will do them harm, when in reality it has been born with completely pure and good intentions. It is attacked by townspeople, beaten by Felix (who it thought could be a friend) and shot at by a peasant. It is no wonder it turns evil in the face of such prejudice. Shelley makes us question how we treat those who appear monstrous when we may be monsters ourselves.

Victor also suffers prejudice, in parallel with the Monster, when he is washed up in Ireland and treated with immediate suspicion and anger, called a 'villain', and accused of a murder he did not commit.

Justine suffers prejudice, and pays with her life, when she is accused of murdering a child. That child, William, is himself prejudiced. He insults the Monster with the same words Victor uses against it, when all it wanted was to make friends. Shelley is constantly showing her readers the destructive and isolating nature of prejudice.

# Isolation

Frankenstein is full of characters who suffer physical or emotional isolation. Shelley deliberately chose settings that would emphasize this, such as the remote vastness of the Arctic Circle, where the story begins and ends.

Walton chooses to isolate himself in this frozen wasteland, yet soon regrets the absence of a true companion on his expedition.

Victor also chooses to isolate himself, firstly at university in Ingolstadt, when he avoids contact with his family to work on the Monster. Later, he neglects Elizabeth (his most loving, unfailing companion) out of fear she will discover his secret. He then chooses the remote Orkney Islands on which to embark on the construction of the second creature, and seems most comfortable when surrounded by the wilderness of vast lakes, towering mountains or wild heathland.

It is no surprise that when Victor meets the Monster for the first time since its creation the setting is high up in the Swiss Alps. Both are drawn to it as a place where they can attempt to escape reminders of what they have done and become. Also, *sublime* landscapes such as these overwhelming remind the reader of the characters' insignificance compared with the awesome power of nature.

The Monster is another victim of isolation. Unlike Walton and Victor, it does not bring this upon itself. Indeed, it tries early on to make contact with humans and connect with them, but is always abused, leading to self-imposed isolation in the hovel next to the De Laceys' cottage.

The torment it feels at being excluded from society in general, and loving companionship in particular, is what makes it ask Victor for a mate. When it later witnesses Victor tearing this mate to pieces, it sees a lifetime of isolation ahead and only then commits its most terrible crimes. Shelley's point here is that isolation, whether self-imposed or not, can only bring about unhappiness, a breakdown in civilization and, ultimately, tragic consequences.