Frankenstein Study Guide

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Summary

Volume One

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* begins with a series of letters from English explorer Robert Walton to his sister, Margaret Saville. Walton has traveled to Russia to fulfill his lifelong dream of embarking on a voyage to the Arctic, where he hopes to make important scientific discoveries. After sailing steadily north for a while, Walton and his crew find themselves surrounded by ice and witness a strange sight: a huge man in a dogsled speeding across the frozen sea. The next day they rescue a different, emaciated man who is stranded on a sheet of ice with the remnants of a dogsled beside him. This man is later revealed to be Victor Frankenstein. Victor is near death and remains unable to speak for several days. Walton nurses him back to health in his cabin, and as the two men become acquainted, Walton grows to love and admire his mysterious, melancholy guest. Victor is clearly suffering from some terrible loss, and he reveals that he came to the Arctic to pursue the huge man Walton saw previously. After Walton tells him that he is willing to sacrifice anything to achieve his scientific ambitions, Victor decides to tell the captain the story of his life, which Walton records.

In the first part of his tale, Victor spends an idyllic childhood in Geneva, Switzerland, with his loving upper-class family. He enjoys particularly close relationships with his adopted sister, Elizabeth, and his best friend, Henry Clerval. At an early age he develops a passion for natural philosophy, and he spends his adolescence devouring the works of the medieval alchemists, dreaming of discovering the elixir of life. When he realizes how outdated the alchemists’ theories are in comparison to modern theories, however, he becomes disillusioned and gives up his study of the sciences entirely.

When he is seventeen, Victor’s parents decide to send him to school at the University of Ingolstadt. But just before he is scheduled to leave, his mother, Caroline, dies of scarlet fever. After spending time mourning with his family, Victor travels to Ingolstadt as planned. There he meets professor of biology M. Krempe and professor of chemistry M. Waldman, who inspires him to resume his study of the sciences. For the next four years, Victor applies himself to his studies with a passion, driven by an ambition to reveal the mysteries of nature, life, and death, and winning acclaim for his achievements. He is particularly fascinated by the idea of discovering how to create life. Just as he is about to return home to Geneva, his experiments finally succeed. Victor spends the next two years assembling an eight-foot-tall man out of parts taken from cadavers. When he succeeds in bringing his creation to life, however, Victor is so horrified by the creature’s hideous appearance that he runs away. After wandering the streets of Ingolstadt all night, Victor runs into Henry Clerval, who has arrived to begin his own course of study at the university. When the friends return to Victor’s apartment, Victor is relieved to find the creature gone, but he remains so agitated that he falls into a months-long state of fever and delirium. Clerval nurses him back to health.
Just as Victor is beginning to feel like his old self again, he receives word that his youngest brother, William, has been murdered. He returns to Geneva for the first time in six years. While walking through Plainpalais, where William was killed, Victor sees the creature he brought to life scaling a steep mountain. He becomes convinced that his creature is responsible for the murder. When he arrives home, however, Victor’s family tells him their beloved servant, Justine Moritz, has been accused of the crime. Victor expresses his disbelief but chooses to keep quiet about the creature, fearing he would be thought mad if he were to tell his story and believing that Justine will be acquitted. But Justine is found guilty, largely because a valuable necklace that Elizabeth lent to William to wear on the night of the murder—and that was missing from William’s corpse—was found in Justine’s clothes. Justine is hanged, and Victor is racked with guilt.

Volume Two

After Justine’s execution, Victor attempts to relieve his inner turmoil by riding alone through the Alps to the valley of Chamounix. On a nearby glacier, he is approached by the creature, who asks Victor to listen to his story. Though initially filled with rage and hatred for his creation, Victor agrees to accompany the creature to his hut and hear his tale.

The creature tells Victor that on the night he was brought to life, he made his way into the forest near Ingolstadt, where he lived on roots and berries. After being chased out of a village he had wandered into in search of food and shelter, he hid in a hovel attached to a small cottage in the woods. The cottage was inhabited by a loving family consisting of two siblings, Felix and Agatha; their blind father, whom the creature calls by his and his children’s last name, De Lacey; and, later, Felix’s fiancee, Safie. For nearly two years, the creature secretly observed and did favors for the cottagers, whom he grew to deeply admire. He learned that the De Laceys had once been respected members of the Parisian upper class but were exiled after Felix helped a wrongfully convicted Turkish merchant escape from prison. Felix and the merchant’s daughter, Safie, had fallen in love, and instead of returning to Constantinople with her father, Safie had run away in order to reunite with Felix. The creature was moved by this story, as well as by the stories of virtuous Greeks and Romans he heard Felix read aloud to Safie. He learned to speak, read, and write French, enabling him to read books he found in the forest (including John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*) and Victor’s journal, which he found in the pocket of a coat he had taken from Victor’s apartment. When he read the journal, the creature was horrified to learn about his origins and his abandonment by his creator. Tormented by loneliness and longing above all to be accepted into the cottagers’ family in spite of his frightening appearance, the creature eventually introduced himself to De Lacey, who showed him compassion. But when Felix, Agatha, and Safie saw them together, Felix attacked the creature, and the cottagers moved away the next day. The anguished creature burned the empty cottage before setting out to find Victor, whom he holds responsible for his suffering.

In the woods on the way to Geneva, the creature saved a child from drowning in a river and was shot in the arm by the child’s guardian. This incident filled him with feelings of hatred and vengeance toward humanity. Then, in Plainpalais, he encountered William and seized him with the intention of making him his companion. When the creature learned that the boy was a member of the Frankenstein family, he strangled him to death in order to make Victor suffer. He then took the necklace William was wearing, attracted by the beautiful miniature of Caroline Frankenstein. When he saw Justine Moritz asleep in a nearby barn, the creature planted the necklace on her so that she would be forced to pay for his crime.

After telling his story, the creature has one request for Victor: he wants Victor to create him a female companion who, being as ugly as himself, will not reject him. If Victor consents, the creature and his mate will live a peaceful life far away from humanity in South America. If Victor refuses, however, the creature will continue to destroy Victor’s life and murder his loved ones. Victor reluctantly agrees to the creature’s terms and returns to Geneva.
Volume Three

At home in Geneva, Victor puts off his promise to the creature. His father, Alphonse—who, along with Victor’s mother, always hoped Victor and Elizabeth would one day marry—suggests Victor marry Elizabeth now in order to raise everyone’s spirits. Victor loves Elizabeth but realizes he needs to fulfill his promise to the creature before marrying her. He decides to travel to England to speak to scientists who have made new discoveries he believes will help him with his task. He also plans to find a remote place where he can assemble the female creature. Accompanied by Clerval, Victor sails to London, where he reluctantly begins to gather information and materials. Clerval, meanwhile, enthusiastically sets about securing a career in England’s trade with India. When the two are invited to Scotland by a mutual acquaintance, Victor accompanies Clerval on the journey north and leaves him with their acquaintance in Perth. He then travels to the Orkney Islands, where he rents a hut in an isolated corner of the archipelago and begins to assemble a female creature.

One night when the new creature is near completion, Victor begins to ponder the possible consequences of his current work: the two creatures might wreak havoc together or even begin a new race of monsters that would threaten humankind. When he suddenly sees the creature’s face at the window, Victor destroys the creature’s unfinished mate. Devastated and enraged, the creature confronts Victor and swears revenge. Ominously, he tells Victor to remember that he will be with him on his wedding night. The next day, Victor receives a letter from Clerval asking him to travel to Perth so the two can return to London together, and Victor prepares to leave. Late that night he rows out to sea and throws the remains of the female creature overboard, then falls asleep in the boat. When he wakes up the next day, he realizes he is lost at sea and can do nothing but let the wind carry him. Eventually he reaches a harbor, where he is told that he has arrived in Ireland and must report to the local magistrate, Mr. Kirwin, on suspicion of murder. When he does so, several witnesses describe having found a young man’s dead body on the beach and having seen a man nearby in Victor’s boat. When he is shown the dead body, Victor realizes it belongs to Clerval, and he cries out in horror that he has destroyed his friend. Victor is then thrown in jail, where he lies delirious with fever. Two months later, he begins to recover, and his father, summoned by the sympathetic Mr. Kirwin, arrives from Geneva.

Victor is found innocent based on his presence on the Orkneys at the time of the murder, but he remains overwhelmed by guilt, depressed to the verge of suicide, and dependent on the laudanum he was administered while ill in prison. He and Alphonse return to Geneva, where Elizabeth is the only person able to somewhat lessen Victor’s misery. Though he still believes the creature intends to murder him on his wedding night, Victor agrees to marry Elizabeth as planned and looks forward to the marriage with a mixture of hope and fear. After their wedding, the couple travel to the town of Evian, where they stay at an inn. That night, seized by anxiety, Victor tells Elizabeth to wait for him in a separate room, then paces around the inn keeping watch for the creature. He hears a scream and runs into Elizabeth’s room to find her dead and the creature at the window. Search parties set out to track down the creature but are unsuccessful, and Victor returns to Geneva to ensure the safety of his remaining family members. He finds his father and his younger brother, Ernest, safe, but Alphonse falls ill when he learns of Elizabeth’s death and dies a few days later. Victor then suffers a mental breakdown and is confined to an asylum for several months.

After his release, Victor brings his case before a magistrate, demanding the creature be tracked down and brought to justice. When the magistrate appears skeptical of his story, however, Victor decides to leave Geneva and seek vengeance on his own. He pays a visit to his family tomb on the night of his departure, where the creature taunts him before disappearing into the darkness. Victor follows, beginning a pursuit that leads him into the wilderness of Russia and what was then known as Tartary. The creature leaves him food and clues, including notes written on tree bark and rocks in which the creature taunts Victor and commands him to follow him into the Arctic. Eventually Victor arrives at the Arctic Ocean, where he pursues the creature across the frozen sea in a dogsled. Just as he is beginning to gain on the creature, the ice breaks, separating
them, and Victor is cast adrift on a floating sheet of ice. After several hours, he is rescued by Walton and his crew. Finished with his tale, he asks Walton to complete his revenge if he should die.

Walton, resuming his role as narrator, relates that he continues to admire Victor and that he wishes he could convince his ailing guest to continue living. Victor, while grateful to Walton, is resigned to his fate; he wants only to fulfill his task of destroying the creature and to be reunited with his loved ones in death. When the ship becomes immured in ice, Victor delivers a rousing speech in which he exhorts both captain and crew to continue their voyage north, but Walton eventually agrees to the sailors’ demand that they turn the ship around at the first opportunity rather than risk further danger. The ice breaks several days later, and Walton and his crew set a course for England. Victor, whose health has been rapidly declining, tells Walton that all feelings of hatred and vengeance have left him, but he still believes the creature should be destroyed. He dies later that same day.

That night, Walton finds the creature standing over Victor’s body. In spite of the terrible injustice he feels he has been shown by human beings, the creature laments having destroyed Victor’s life and says he is tormented by remorse and self-loathing. He tells Walton he plans to travel as far north as possible, where he will build himself a funeral pyre and finally die. Then the creature leaps out the window and onto a sheet of ice, eventually disappearing into the night.

Additional Summary: Summary

*Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus* is the work for which Shelley is remembered by the general public. The story unfolds in a series of letters from Robert Walton, an enterprising arctic explorer, to his sister in England. Walton reports the sighting of a giant manlike creature driving a dogsled in the icy distance. This scene is followed by the rescue of a man whose sled had become stranded in the ice floe. This man is Victor Frankenstein.

As he recovers his health, Frankenstein relates his story. He tells of his warm family life in Geneva and of his early enthusiasm for the speculative natural philosophy of alchemists such as Cornelius Agrippa. At the age of twenty-one, he leaves to study science at Ingolstadt. There, he learns the difference between modern science and mysticism. He embraces scientific method but holds onto one of the dreams of his former models—the creation of life. Ultimately, he completely embraces this goal, assembling a being of huge scale in order to simplify its construction. When his creature gains life, Frankenstein is instantly revolted. He exits the flat and wanders about, hoping that the spark of life in the creature will expire spontaneously. The following day, the creature has disappeared, and Victor is visited by his best friend, Henry Clerval, who, unaware of the creature’s existence, helps Victor to regain his composure over the next several months. In early May, Victor’s younger brother William is murdered outside Geneva. A servant is accused of the crime. Upon his return home, Victor catches a brief sight of the creature, whose existence has nearly slipped Victor’s mind. He senses that the creature is responsible for his brother’s murder, but he remains silent as the servant is convicted of the crime. After the trial, while vacationing in the Alps, Victor meets the creature on a glacier. There, he learns of the creature’s cruel rejection by humankind, its self-education (the creature is easily the most articulate character in the book), and its subsequent revenge on its creator. Though the creature did indeed murder William, Victor is torn between hatred and sympathy. Reluctantly, he agrees to animate a female companion for the creature.

After months of indecision, Victor retires to the Orkney Islands (north of Scotland) to begin the work that he has promised. Midway through, in sight of the creature himself, he becomes fearful of the havoc that might be caused by a race of such fiends. He destroys the lifeless torso over which he stands. The creature vows to be with Victor on Victor’s wedding night (he is engaged to a cousin) and departs. After murdering Victor’s friend Clerval, a crime of which Victor is briefly accused, the creature disappears. Victor is wed in Geneva.
and awaits his confrontation with the creature. Instead, the creature slips into his bedroom, murders his bride, and escapes. Finally, Victor goes to the authorities. Finding no hope there, he pursues the creature himself, winding up on Walton’s ship. There, he dies from the exhaustion of the hunt. The novel closes with a visit to Walton’s ship by the creature. The creature laments the death of his creator and departs, vowing to take his own life.

As is clear, Shelley’s novel is not quite the grave-robbing horror story associated with the original Hollywood version starring Boris Karloff. Instead, the book exemplifies all the characteristics of Shelley’s work noted previously. Stylistically, Shelley moves the narrative along at a rapid pace, avoiding weighty details or intricate plotting. The result is a book that is easily read and in which the geographic settings are striking, in part because they have so little with which to compete in the way of description. On the other hand, there is only one well-realized character, the creature himself, which, in this case, happens to be enough. In addition, Frankenstein is—to put it frankly—hopelessly contrived, with coincidence appearing as a law of nature. Indeed, one reason for the distortions of the film and dramatic versions of the story has been the need for a narrative that makes a little more sense than the novel does when held up to critical scrutiny.

Frankenstein is also autobiographical. For one thing, with the exception of the arctic wastelands, the book’s geographic settings come right out of the author’s various travels. For another, the creature’s reading list, including John Milton’s Paradise Lost (1667, 1674) and Plutarch’s Bioi paralleloi (c. 105-115 c.e.; Parallel Lives, 1579), closely mirror Shelley’s own reading fare at the time that she wrote the novel. On a more profound level, the novel reflects Shelley’s experience with the traumas of birth and rejection.

This discussion raises the issue of family. Victor Frankenstein turns his back on an idyllic family life in favor of an unsavory scientific quest. Yet the creature aches for the nurturing affection and guidance that can be provided by a loving family. Finally, the novel can be seen as a tale of what happens when women are omitted from the process of procreation. The result is a creature who is unnatural and unloved. This last omission is the direct cause of the creature’s hideous crimes.

Larger philosophical themes also abound in Frankenstein. One might begin with the reference to Prometheus in the subtitle and the references to Paradise Lost in the text. Prometheus is best known as the mythic figure who stole the secret of fire from the gods and gave it to humanity, an act for which he was severely punished. This association suggests that Victor is a victim of his own hubris in seeking the divine power of creation. Less well known is the myth in which Prometheus creates the human race, providing a clear parallel with Victor. Milton’s work poetically examines the fall from grace in Eden according to the Old Testament. Frankenstein’s creature expressly compares himself to Adam. In this case, paradise is not lost; it was never part of the bargain according to Victor’s foggy conception of his task.

Frankenstein also suggests the dangers of amoral science or unrestrained rationality, the imperfection of civil justice, and the superficiality of human judgment. It is perhaps most basically a book about the concurrent limits and limitlessness of human nature and human knowledge. It encourages one to remember that the power to create may produce consequences that cannot be foreseen or controlled.

Additional Summary: Summary

English explorer Robert Walton’s ship is held fast in polar ice. As his company looks out over the empty ice field, they are astonished to see a sledge drawn by dogs speeding northward. The sledge driver looks huge and misshapen. At night, an ice floe carries to the ship another sledge with one dog and a man in weakened condition. When the newcomer learns that his is the second sledge sighted from the ship, he becomes agitated.
Walton is greatly attracted to the newcomer during his convalescence, and as the ship remains stuck in the ice, the men have leisure time to get acquainted. At last, after he has recovered somewhat from exposure and hunger, the man, Victor Frankenstein, tells Walton his story.

Victor is born into an aristocratic family in Geneva, Switzerland. As a playmate for their son, the parents adopt a lovely little girl, Elizabeth, of the same age. Victor and Elizabeth grow up as brother and sister. Much later another son, William, is born to the Frankensteins.

At an early age, Victor shows promise in the natural sciences. He devours the works of Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus and thinks in his ignorance that they had been the real masters. When he grows older, his father decides to send him to the university at Ingolstadt. There, he soon learns all that his masters can teach him in the field of natural science. Engaged in brilliant and terrible research, he stumbles by chance on the secret of creating life. Once he has gained this knowledge, he cannot rest until he has employed it to create a living being. By haunting the butcher shops and dissecting rooms, he soon has the necessary raw materials. With great cunning, he fashions an eight-foot monster and endows him with life.

As soon as Victor creates his monster, however, he is subject to strange misgivings. During the night, the monster comes to his bed. At the sight of the horrible face, Victor shrieks and frightens the monster. Overcome by the horror of his act, he becomes ill with a brain fever. His best friend, Henry Clerval, arrives from Geneva and helps to nurse him through his illness. He cannot tell Clerval what he has done.

Terrible news then comes from Geneva. William, Victor’s young brother, had been killed at the hand of a murderer. He was found strangled in a park, and a faithful family servant, Justine, was charged with the crime. Victor hurries to Geneva. At the trial, Justine tells a convincing story. She had been looking for William in the countryside and, returning after the city gates had been closed, had spent the night in a deserted hut; she cannot, however, explain how a miniature from William’s neck came to be in her pocket. Victor and Elizabeth believe the girl’s story, but despite all of their efforts, Justine is convicted and condemned.

Depressed by these tragic events, Victor goes hiking over the mountainous countryside. Far ahead on the glacier, he sees a strange, agile figure that fills him with horrible suspicions. Unable to overtake the figure, he sits down to rest. Suddenly, the monster appears before him. The creature demands that Victor listen to his story. The monster begins to tell him that when he left Victor’s chambers in Ingolstadt, everyone he met screamed and ran from him. Wandering confusedly, the monster finally found shelter in an abandoned hovel adjoining a cottage. By great stealth, he remained there during daylight and at night sought berries for food. Through observation, he began to learn the ways of humankind. Feeling an urge to friendship, he brought wood to the cottage every day, but when he attempted to make friends with the cottagers, he was repulsed with such fear and fury that his heart became bitter toward all people. When he saw William playing in the park, he strangled the boy and took the miniature from his neck. Then during the night, he came upon Justine in the hut and put the picture in her pocket. During the night, he came upon Justine in the hut and put the picture in her pocket.

The monster now makes a horrible demand. He insists that Victor fashion a mate for him who will give him love and companionship. The monster threatens to ravage and kill at random if Victor refuses the request; but, if Victor agrees, the monster promises to take his mate to the wilds of South America, where they will never again be seen by humankind. It is a hard choice, but Victor feels that he must accept.

Victor leaves for England with his friend Clerval. After parting from his friend, he goes to the distant Orkney Islands and begins his task. He is almost ready to animate the gross mass of flesh when his conscience stops him. He cannot let the two monsters mate and spawn a race of monsters. He destroys his work. The monster is watching at a window. Angered to see his mate destroyed, he forces his way into the house and warns Victor that a terrible punishment will fall upon the young man on his wedding night. Then the monster escapes by sea. Later, to torment his maker, he fiendishly kills Clerval.
Victor is suspected of the crime. Released for lack of evidence, he returns to Geneva. He and Elizabeth are married there. Although Victor is armed and alert, the monster gets into the nuptial chamber and strangles the bride. Victor shoots at him, but he escapes again. Victor vows to follow the monster and kill him.

Weakened by exposure, Victor dies on Walton’s ship in the ice—Elizabeth, William, Justine, and Clerval remain unavenged. The monster comes to the dead man’s cabin, and Walton, stifling his fear, addresses the gigantic, hideous creature. Victor’s is the greater crime, the monster says. He had created a man, a man without love or friend or soul. He deserves his punishment. The monster then vanishes over the ice field.

**Additional Summary: Summary**

Few works of fiction have captured the public's imagination as *Frankenstein* has. Several plays, numerous movies, television shows, and even comic strips have been based on it, and generations of children have dressed up as the monster for Halloween. Although originally published over one hundred and fifty years ago, the book is still in print in almost every major language. According to Janet Harris, "since the first year of its publication there has always been, somewhere in the world, a printing press at work turning out still another copy or version of Mary's immortal story." The monster indeed has a life of his own apart from the book, as perhaps only Sherlock Holmes and Scrooge out of all the characters originally in novels do. Each generation adds its own characteristics to the monster.

Some scholars have identified *Frankenstein* as the source of the genre of science fiction, which seeks to define the place of man in the universe. Both the idea of a "mad scientist" and the concept of creating a person in a laboratory originated with *Frankenstein*. Following Mary Shelley's lead, authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Louis Stevenson, H. G. Wells, and, more recently, Robert A. Heinlein and Ray Bradbury have created horror stories whose protagonists face problems brought about by science gone awry.

*Frankenstein* is also a product of its time, the early nineteenth century, a world of social, political, scientific, and economic upheaval. On the one hand, the novel emphasizes the importance of the intellect in seeking out the secrets of the universe (rationalism). Yet it also validates the emotions and the importance of individual needs (romanticism).

Aside from its historical interest, why does *Frankenstein* continue to be so popular, and what does it say to us today? For one thing, at the heart of the novel is a question about science and its relationship to humanity. Does science always act for the good of man, or does it have a dark side? Does man have the right or the power and intellect to act as a creator or God? Mary Shelley's answer seems to be that science and progress are ethically neutral with the capacity to work for either good or evil. Science thus presents humans with the enormous challenge to handle its power responsibly and humanely.

**Opening Letters**

*Frankenstein* opens with Robert Walton's letter from St. Petersburgh, Russia, to his sister in England. He encourages her to share his enthusiasm about his journey to the North Pole to discover both the secret of magnetism and a passage through the pole. In additional letters he wavers between his solitude and alienation on the one hand, and his determined heart and resolved will on the other. His last letter tells the startling story of his having seen a being of gigantic stature shaped like a man, fleeing across the ice which is threatening to enclose the ship. The next day another sled appears, carrying the wasted and maddened Victor Frankenstein, who is pursuing the giant. Walton takes Frankenstein aboard. When he tells Frankenstein his purpose, how he hopes to make great discoveries, Frankenstein cautions him to leave off his mad pursuit. He asks him to listen to his story of how once he began in earnest to know all that could be known.
**Victor's Story, Part I**

Born in Naples, Italy, to a wealthy Swiss family, Victor Frankenstein is the only child of doting parents. When he is five, his mother brings home an orphaned girl named Elizabeth to be Victor's "sister." In Victor's happy childhood in Geneva, he and Elizabeth grow in their parents' love, and they are joined by more siblings. Victor develops a deep friendship with Henry Clerval, a fellow student. Where Clerval studies "the moral relations of things," Victor conceives a passion to discover the physical secrets of the world.

At seventeen, as he is to leave for the University at Ingolstadt, Elizabeth contracts scarlet fever. Nursed by Victor's mother, she recovers, but his mother dies. On her deathbed, she begs Elizabeth and Victor to wed. After some delay, Victor departs for Ingolstadt, where his chemistry professor so encourages him in the study of science that Victor determines to discover the secret of life, perhaps even how to create life itself. He pursues his studies in the chemistry lab and in dissecting rooms and morgues, gathering the material for his experiment to make a creature from discarded corpses, perhaps one "like himself." Cut off from contact with all others, ignoring letters from friends and family, he exhausts himself. Finally, on a dreary November night, Victor succeeds in animating a creature. Drained of all strength, he falls asleep, only to awaken from a nightmare to find the creature staring at him. He flees in horror at what he has done.

The next day Clerval arrives and Victor's appearance and condition shock him. Victor can not tell Clerval what he has done. He believes he can keep his secret, for, on his return to his room, he discovers that the creature has fled. The nervous exhaustion into which Victor then falls lasts for several months, during which Clerval nurses him by taking him away from the lab and into the mountains on long walks.

Victor receives from his father a letter relating the death of Victor's younger brother William, strangled by someone while out walking. A necklace with a miniature likeness of Victor's mother was missing when the corpse was found. On his frantic return journey, in an electrical storm in the mountains near Geneva, Victor sees the monster and thinks that the monster might have killed William. At home Victor learns that everyone believes Justine, a family servant, to be guilty, for the necklace missing from the corpse was found on her. Victor exclaims that she is innocent, that he knows who the killer is, but does not speak up at her trial. Justine gives a forced confession and is convicted and hung. Overcome with remorse at the deaths of William and Justine, convinced of his own guilt, Victor seeks solitude. Elizabeth and his father attribute his behavior to his grief at his brother's death. He leaves the house to walk the Swiss Alps, journeying to the village of Chamounix. In a painful retreat amid the "solitary grandeur" of the mountains, he meets the monster crossing an ice field. To Victor's shocked expressions of outrage the monster replies calmly, asking Frankenstein to listen with compassion to his tale.

**The Monster's Story**

After fleeing from the laboratory on the night of his "birth," the monster discovers himself cold, unfed, and unbefriended in the mountains outside Ingolstadt, "a poor, helpless, miserable wretch." He searches for food and shelter, which he finally finds in a hovel adjoined to a cottage. He observes the cottage's inhabitants an old man, a young man and woman. When he learns that the cottagers are not so happy as he believes they should be, he gathers firewood at night to replenish their woodpile and lessen their labors. Meanwhile, in the course of several seasons, he studies them, learns their names (Felix and Agatha and their father), and begins to study their language.

One day another woman arrives on horseback. Felix seems especially happy in her presence. The monster listens as Felix instructs her from a history book. He learns of human law and government, of rank and wealth, of human greatness and vileness. "Of what a strange nature is knowledge!" he exclaims. Above all, he learns of his own lonely deformity.

He later tells Frankenstein the story of this De Lacey family, a wealthy French family who suffered a reversal of fortunes, were imprisoned, and exiled to the poverty in which the monster finds them. From such books as
John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* the monster learns more of human virtues and vices and of his own misery.

And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant, but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was, besides, endowed with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they and could subsist on a coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded theirs. When I looked around I saw and heard of none like me. Was I, then, a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled and whom all men disowned?

One day when only the old man is in the cottage, the monster enters, introducing himself as a weary traveler. He discovers that because the old man is blind, he is not repulsed by him. The monster then tells his tale of misery and loneliness; the old man responds sympathetically. When the others return, horrified at his monstrous appearance, they chase him. From seclusion in the forest, the next night he emerges to burn down the cottage. He then flees toward Ingolstadt, determined on vengeance. He comes upon young William Frankenstein out walking. When the boy repulses the monster's friendly overtures, the monster kills him. He takes from the boy a locket with the likeness of a woman and when he later meets another young woman asleep in a barn, he places the locket on her, certain that he can implicate her in the boy's murder. He concludes his tale by proposing to Victor that only Victor's creation of a female of similar deformity will grant him the happiness he cannot find among humans.

**Victor's Story, Part II**
The monster pleads with Victor to make him a mate, threatening him and his family if he does not. Frankenstein agrees, but only on condition that the creatures flee to uninhabitable parts of the earth where they will do no harm to humans. Victor returns to his family, more downhearted than ever. His father proposes that the long-hoped-for marriage of Victor and Elizabeth might restore Victor to happiness. Victor wishes instead to travel to England to discover from philosophers there something he believes might complete his work. He promises to marry Elizabeth on his return. His father arranges to have Clerval meet him along the way in Strasbourg, France. They walk in the mountains, then travel by boat down the Rhine River and to England. In Edinburgh, Scotland, Victor asks Clerval to permit him to travel on alone for a time. Frankenstein, convinced that the monster has been following him, seeks solitude for his work on a remote island in the Scottish Orkneys. On a moonlit night his fears are realized when he looks up from his work on the new creature to discover the monster peering at him through the window. Victor then vows to destroy his new, half-finished creation. The monster threatens him: "I will be with you on your wedding night."

Frankenstein takes the remains of the new creature and dumps them into the sea from a boat he takes offshore. When he awakens hours later, he has drifted to Ireland. Several people on shore take him to a magistrate to answer for the death of a man found murdered the previous evening. The man, to Victor's horror, is Clerval. Imprisoned for several months, Frankenstein is freed after the magistrate discovers Victor's innocence. The magistrate sends for Victor's father in Geneva to bring him home. On his return he marries Elizabeth, worried all the while about the monster's threat, "I shall be with you on your wedding night." He interprets this to mean that the monster will kill him. On the wedding night, however, the monster breaks into their room and kills Elizabeth. After he sees the monster staring through the window, grinning, Victor vows to seek revenge. He pursues the monster across the Alps, across Europe, into Russia and north to the pole, where he finds himself stranded on an ice flow before he is taken aboard Walton's ship.

**Closing Letters**
One week after his last letter to his sister, during which Frankenstein relates his story, Walton writes again to say that Frankenstein still intends to pursue the creature until he dies. Walton, too, is still determined to pursue his quest, although mountains of ice surround the ship and threaten to lock it in place. When his sailors ask to
turn back, Walton consents to turn south. His final letter to his sister recounts Frankenstein's death and his
dying advice to Walton to forego ambition and seek tranquility instead. Walton's grief over his new friend's
death is interrupted by the appearance of the monster in Frankenstein's cabin, grieving over the death of his
creator. The monster tells Walton how his vengeance had never been joyful to him, how he was unjustly
treated by the humanity which had created him. Thus, though born in innocence and goodness, he became
malignant evil. He now lives in remorse, alone. After having said all this, he springs from the cabin window
and disappears across the ice.

**Chapter Summaries: Volume 1: Letters 1–4 Summary and Analysis**

**Letter One**

*Frankenstein* begins with a series of letters from English explorer Robert Walton to his sister, Margaret
Saville, in London. In the first letter, dated “Dec. 11th, 17—,” Walton writes of his arrival in St. Petersburg,
Russia, and of his excitement at the prospect of embarking upon an expedition to the Arctic. Though he has
dreamed of this expedition since childhood, Walton previously abandoned the idea in order to become a poet.
When this pursuit ended in disappointment and failure, Walton decided to return to his childhood ambition
with the help of a recent inheritance. For the next six years, he gained sailing experience on whaling ships
while studying science, mathematics, and medicine. Now, with this voyage, he hopes not only to finally set
foot on the land that has captured his imagination all his life but to make discoveries about magnetism,
astronomy, and a possible passage to the Pacific Ocean. He confesses to his sister that though he is confident
in his purpose, he sometimes loses hope of success when he thinks of the difficulties he knows he will face.
His next step will be to seek out a ship and sailors in the seaport of Archangel.

**Letter Two**

In the second letter, dated March 28, Walton writes from Archangel that he has found both a ship and a
courageous crew. Despite this, however, he confesses that he is not entirely happy. He longs for an
understanding friend to share in his joys and disappointments, to sympathize with his Romantic nature, and to
repair what he considers his faults—namely his lack of formal education. Though he doesn’t expect to find
such a friend in Archangel or on his voyage, Walton does admire the men he has enlisted. The lieutenant is a
fellow Englishman Walton first met on a whaling expedition and is highly driven to achieve glory. The ship’s
master is known for his kindness and, years ago, bestowed his entire fortune on the lover of a young Russian
woman to whom he was engaged, then left the country so that his former fiancee could marry the man she
loved. Though he is certainly noble, the ship's master is also uneducated and quiet.

As he waits for the harsh winter to give way to spring, Walton anticipates his voyage with a mixture of
excitement and fear. He alludes to “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” confessing that his passion for the sea
was partially shaped by Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s famous poem and that he is driven by a “belief in the
marvelous.” If he doesn’t return from his expedition, he hopes his sister will remember him.

**Letter Three**

Walton’s third letter, dated July 7, brims with confidence. His ship is making good progress north, the sailors
remain undaunted by the sheets of ice they have begun to encounter, and the voyage has so far proceeded
without any real difficulties or incidents of note. Walton assures his sister that he will continue to be
determined and sensible. Having come this far, he now fully expects to achieve success.
Letter Four

The fourth letter consists of three separate entries written on different days. The first entry, from August 5, describes how Walton’s ship becomes enclosed by ice and mist, unable to move. When the mist clears, Walton and the crew see that they are surrounded by vast stretches of ice on every side. Suddenly, a gigantic man guiding a sledge drawn by dogs comes into view and quickly disappears into the distance. The ice breaks a couple of hours later, but they decide to wait until the next day to continue north. In the morning, Walton is surprised to see the crew speaking to a man adrift on a fragment of ice. Though he has a sledge and dogs, this is clearly not the same man as the one who sped by the day before. Walton is further astonished when the stranded man wants to know where the ship is headed. When he learns they are sailing for the north pole, he agrees to come on board, and Walton and the sailors carry his emaciated, nearly frozen body into the cabin.

For two days, the mysterious traveler is unable to speak. Walton eventually brings him into his own cabin and reports that he finds this melancholy, tormented man fascinating. More mysterious still is the stranger’s admission that he has been pursuing the other, gigantic man, whom he calls “the daemon.” After hearing that Walton and the sailors saw the object of his pursuit, the stranger becomes much more animated and wants to keep watch on deck, but Walton persuades him to stay in the cabin and rest. He tells Margaret that although he previously despaired of ever finding a true friend, he has begun to feel a brotherly love for this strange man, whose grief fills Walton with compassion.

On August 13, Walton writes that his affection for the stranger—whose name, though he has not yet revealed it, is Victor Frankenstein—continues to grow. While he admires Victor’s wisdom and gentle manners, he also feels pity for his grief. Walton describes his willingness to sacrifice everything in order to gain the knowledge he seeks in the Arctic, and Victor begins to weep, telling the captain he has a tale that would make him abandon his ambitions. After this outburst, however, Victor recovers himself and urges Walton to speak more about his own life. He is sympathetic to Walton’s yearning for a friend and says he once had such a friend himself, but now he has lost everything. Walton says that in spite of his sadness, Victor possesses a deep appreciation for the beauty of nature and an intelligence that elevates him above anyone Walton has ever met.

In the letter’s last entry, on August 19, Walton writes that Victor has decided to tell him his story in the hopes that the captain might learn from it. Walton at first hoped he might be able to help Victor once he knew his history, but Victor maintains that, while there is still time for Walton to change his course, his own fate is sealed. Nevertheless, Walton looks forward with curiosity and sympathy to hearing his guest’s tale. He resolves to record the story in Victor’s own words, both for Margaret and for himself.

Analysis

Walton’s letters to Margaret serve as a framing device for the narrative that follows. Incredible as Victor’s story will turn out to be, the letters lend it a sense of authenticity as well as wonder. Walton’s writing shows him to be a practical, intelligent, sensitive individual and therefore a reasonably reliable narrator.

Moreover, the letters establish the first of several parallels that will be important throughout the novel: the parallel between Victor’s story and Walton’s. Walton, whose quest for the secrets of the Arctic is fueled as much by his imagination and emotions as by his desire for discovery and knowledge, is a Romantic figure; he quotes the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (whose “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” will reappear later in the novel), laments his own failed attempt to become a poet, and confesses to a belief in the “marvelous.” The Romantic qualities that so captivate him in Victor—sensitivity, deep feeling, expressiveness, a spiritual affinity for the beauty of nature—reflect his own values and traits.
While Walton feels great compassion for his guest’s grief, Victor feels perhaps even greater compassion and concern for Walton. He recognizes that the captain is driven by the same dangerous desire to achieve dominance over the forces of nature that brought his own life to utter ruin, and he is able to sympathize with Walton’s yearning for a close friend precisely because he had such a friend and lost him. In his guest, Walton has found a man he believes could have been the kind of friend he longs for, if only Victor’s spirit hadn’t been broken by suffering. Ironically, it is this very experience of suffering that allows Victor, through the telling of his story, to provide the kind of sympathetic advice Walton longs to receive—albeit in the form of a terrible warning. Both the longing for companionship and the folly of attempting to control natural forces will remain major themes in *Frankenstein*.

It is also significant that Victor appears to be, like Walton, upper-class. Much as he might admire the bravery, skill, and even kindness of his crew—or lament the informality of his own education—the wealthy, well-read captain does not expect to find a true kindred spirit among working-class sailors.

**Chapter Summaries: Volume 1: Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis**

In Chapter One, Victor Frankenstein assumes the role of narrator as Walton records his story.

Victor reveals that he belongs to a distinguished family from Geneva, Switzerland. His father, Alphonse, was a respected politician, one of whose closest friends was a successful merchant named Beaufort. After unexpectedly falling into poverty, Beaufort fled in shame to the town of Lucerne along with his daughter, Caroline. Once there, he became too depressed and ill to look for work, leaving Caroline to care for him and earn their meager income plaiting straw. Ten months later, Beaufort died. Alphonse, having finally discovered where his friend had fled, found Caroline weeping by her father’s coffin. Alphonse took Caroline back to Geneva, where he placed her under the care of his relatives. Two years later, Alphonse and Caroline married. Alphonse revered Caroline for her goodness and dedicated his life to helping her recover from the hardships she had endured. After their wedding, they traveled to Italy, where Victor was born.

Victor’s childhood is a blissful time: his parents are kind and loving, and the family travels often. When he is five, they take a trip to the region of Northern Italy near Lake Como, where his parents—who often pay charitable visits to the poor—notice a particularly impoverished-looking cottage. Caroline and Victor eventually meet the hardworking peasant couple who live there with several children, one of whom is an angelic-looking girl named Elizabeth Lavenza. Caroline learns that Elizabeth is the orphaned daughter of a Milanese nobleman and decides to adopt her. Elizabeth is loved by everyone and becomes to Victor his “more than sister,” whom he regards as his own cherished possession. The two children call each other “cousin.”

As they grow up, Victor and Elizabeth continue to have a close relationship, which draws much of its harmony from their complementary personalities: Elizabeth has a calm disposition and is satisfied with contemplating the beauty of poetry and nature, while Victor is more intense and regards the natural world with a fervent curiosity. Caroline and Alphonse eventually have two more sons, and the family settles in Switzerland permanently, spending most of their time at their country estate in Belrive. At school, Victor finds himself uninterested in most of his classmates but forms a close friendship with a boy named Henry Clerval. While Victor is fascinated by learning the secrets of the natural world, Clerval is concerned with chivalry, adventure, and heroism. Elizabeth, meanwhile, exerts a positive influence on them both with her “saintly soul.”

When Victor is thirteen, he makes a fateful discovery at an inn during a family vacation: a volume of the works of the medieval alchemist Cornelius Agrippa. Victor finds Agrippa’s ideas exciting, but when he shows the book to his father, Alphonse dismisses it as “sad trash” without further explanation. Victor’s passion for
Agrippa only grows, however, and when he returns home, he devours similar works by Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus. Dissatisfied with the sense that modern scientists like Isaac Newton appear to have gained only a tiny glimpse of the secrets of nature, Victor is fascinated by the deeper knowledge these medieval writers seem to have possessed. His imagination is captured above all by the idea of eradicating disease and death by discovering the elixir of life.

At fifteen, during a violent thunderstorm, Victor sees a beautiful old oak tree on his family’s property destroyed by lightning. A man knowledgeable about natural philosophy happens to be staying with the Frankensteins at the time and explains a new theory about electricity and galvanism that seems to Victor infinitely more impressive than the ideas of the alchemists. Disillusioned, Victor decides to abandon natural philosophy entirely, judging it a waste of time, and begins to study mathematics instead. This change brings him peace, and he now regards the decision to give up natural philosophy as the work of his guardian angel. Unfortunately, Victor tells Walton, his guardian angel proved no match for Destiny, who had already decided upon his downfall.

**Analysis**

Victor describes his childhood as idyllic: he comes from a wealthy and loving family, enjoys the peaceful beauty of the Swiss countryside, and has a passionate interest in the world around him. Most importantly, Victor has close relationships with his kindhearted parents, Caroline and Alphonse; his “saintly” adopted sister, Elizabeth; and his adventurous, imaginative best friend, Clerval. The Frankenstein family isn’t untouched by sorrow, however. Victor’s parents were brought together by the impoverishment and death of Caroline’s father, and Elizabeth was left orphaned by the death or imprisonment of her father and raised by poor peasants. Victor himself is an introverted young man who feels isolated from the other boys at school until he strikes up a friendship with Clerval. Love, family, and friendship are portrayed as remedies for all life’s ills.

As he looks back on his happy childhood, however, Victor sees the earliest origins of the tragedy that would destroy his happiness beyond any remedy. His all-consuming interest in the medieval alchemists illustrates his obsessiveness, a trait Victor will later display to a much greater degree. Central to his character are Victor’s dissatisfaction with the limitations of modern science; his desire to attain “real” knowledge of the secrets of nature, life, and death; and his dreams of achieving glory by making discoveries that will benefit humankind. In his youth, his intense and restless passion for discovering scientific knowledge is balanced by Clerval’s focus on the “moral relations of things,” as well as by Elizabeth’s kindness, gentleness, and contentment with appreciating rather than striving to understand nature.

As a child (and in keeping with Victorian gender norms), Victor regarded Elizabeth as his rightful possession, one that he cherished above all else. His statement to Walton that “till death she was to be mine only” foreshadows the tragic events that will be revealed later in the novel, events Victor attributes to “Destiny.” Victor will continue to refer to fate and destiny throughout his narrative, as though the consequences of his actions—or inaction—are preordained and unavoidable. It is also significant that Victor attributes his abandonment of the sciences to the work of his “guardian angel.”

Lightning like that which destroys the oak tree at Belrive will recur several times in the story, often in connection with Victor’s emotions and with the creature he will eventually bring to life. Galvanism, the theory explained to Victor by the Frankensteins’ houseguest after the storm, was a popular topic during the early 1800s, when Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*. Developed by Italian scientist Luigi Galvani in the late 1700s, galvanism centered on the idea that dead bodies could be reanimated by being stimulated with an electrical current. Victor is so impressed by what his guest tells him about galvanism that he abandons the alchemists, which leads him to become disillusioned with natural philosophy as a whole. Giving up natural philosophy
brings Victor peace, but not for long. At the end of the chapter, Victor foreshadows the disasters his scientific career will bring about with another reference to fate: “It [his abandonment of natural philosophy] was a strong effort of the spirit of good; but it was ineffectual. Destiny was too potent, and her immutable laws had decreed my utter and terrible destruction.”

**Chapter Summaries: Volume 1: Chapters 3, 4, and 5 Summary and Analysis**

When Victor is seventeen, his parents decide to send him to school at the University of Ingolstadt in Germany. His departure is delayed, however, when Elizabeth becomes gravely ill with scarlet fever. Victor’s mother is able to nurse Elizabeth back to health but contracts the illness herself in the process. On her deathbed, she tells Victor and Elizabeth that she has always hoped they would one day marry. After his mother’s death, Victor mourns with his family for several weeks. He spends the last evening before his departure with Clerval, who wanted to study at the university with Victor but was prevented from doing so by his merchant father. In the morning, Victor says a fond farewell to Clerval and his family and leaves for Ingolstadt in a melancholy mood, knowing he will miss them and not looking forward to being in the company of strangers. Eventually, though, he begins to feel excited about the knowledge he expects to acquire at the university.

His first morning in Ingolstadt, Victor goes to visit various professors. Driven, in his older self’s view, by the “Angel of Destruction,” he starts with a professor of natural philosophy called M. Krempe. The professor is horrified to learn that Victor’s previous study of science revolved around the medieval alchemists. He invites Victor to attend a series of lectures to be given by himself and, on alternating days, by a chemistry professor called M. Waldman. Victor is disinclined to go, as he finds M. Krempe conceited and unpleasant. Moreover, though Victor can no longer believe in the medieval theories that once fascinated him, he finds modern natural philosophy to be a disappointing, limited endeavor. The next week, however, he decides to sit in on a lecture by M. Waldman and finds his imagination ignited by the charismatic professor’s praise for the achievements of modern chemistry. Victor lies awake that night, resolved to return to his study of the sciences and to “unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation.” The next day he visits M. Waldman at home. The professor receives him kindly and, on hearing of his study of the alchemists, praises them for having inspired much of modern science, even though their theories have been disproven. Careful to conceal just how enthusiastic he is, Victor tells the professor he has decided to study chemistry. M. Waldman advises Victor to study every branch of the sciences, shows him around his laboratory, and lends him books. Victor later regards this day as having decided his destiny.

For the next two years, Victor devotes himself entirely to the study of natural philosophy, particularly chemistry. He often works in his laboratory late into the night. M. Waldman becomes his mentor, and Victor is even able to find value in M. Krempe’s lectures despite the professor’s abrasiveness. He makes rapid progress in his studies and wins acclaim at the university for his accomplishments, and at the end of two years he has learned all he can from his professors. Just as he is considering returning home, however, Victor becomes completely consumed by a monumental new discovery. For some time now he has attempted with “almost supernatural enthusiasm” to discover the source of the life force by studying corpses, a pursuit that, while unpleasant, has left him largely unbothered due to the lack of superstition with which he was raised. Now, finally, he has succeeded not only in discovering the cause of life but the secret of giving life to “lifeless matter.” After spending some time contemplating his new power, Victor excitedly begins the task of creating a human being, who he decides will be a huge eight-foot-tall man. He imagines himself the creator of a new species who will owe him their happiness and gratitude, and hopes he might one day even succeed in bringing the dead back to life. Completely obsessed with his task, Victor works nonstop in his laboratory with body parts he collects from graves, charnel-houses, slaughterhouses, and dissecting rooms, ignoring the disgust he sometimes feels for his work. During this time he neglects both the beauty of nature and his correspondence with his loved ones in Geneva, becoming more anxious and unhealthy all the time.
Late one November night, Victor finally succeeds in bringing his creation to life. The instant the creature opens one of its yellow eyes, Victor is overcome by horror and revulsion. Though he tried to make the creature beautiful, he now finds it hideous, and the dream he worked so hard to achieve becomes a nightmare. He runs into his bedroom and eventually falls asleep, only to wake up terrified from a nightmare about Elizabeth’s death and his mother’s corpse. Not only that, but his creation is standing at his bedside, staring down at him while muttering and grinning. The creature extends a hand toward him as if asking him to stay, but Victor rushes out into the courtyard, where he paces all night in anguish.

In the morning, Victor walks the streets of Ingolstadt, too afraid to return to his apartment. Outside the inn he unexpectedly runs into Clerval. Victor is overjoyed to see his friend—the first happiness he has felt in months. Clerval tells Victor his father has consented to let him study at the university. He expresses concern about how thin and pale Victor has become, and Victor tells him he hopes the work that has led him to that state is now at an end. When they reach Victor’s apartment, Victor fearfully runs upstairs to see if the creature is still there and is relieved to find the apartment empty. As he and Clerval have breakfast together, Victor alarms his old friend with his wild, restless behavior. Hallucinating that the creature is in the room, he falls unconscious from fear. From that point Victor remains ill for several months, frequently raving about his creation while Clerval nurses him back to health. When he recovers, Clerval tells Victor his family longs to receive a letter from him and that one arrived from Elizabeth a few days ago.

**Analysis**

Caroline’s death is the first real tragedy seventeen-year-old Victor has ever experienced, but it will be far from the last—or the worst. Telling his story to Walton, Victor recalls the loss of his mother to scarlet fever as “an omen, as it were, of my future misery.” The fact that Victor is able to obtain solace for his grief from his family members (particularly from Elizabeth) and, eventually, to return to his everyday duties sharply contrasts with how Victor will grieve his later losses. It is in keeping with Victor’s characterization of his mother as infinitely kind, caring, and fond of her adopted daughter that Caroline contracts scarlet fever by taking care of Elizabeth. Her dying wish—that Victor and Elizabeth will marry, and that their marriage will console Alphonse in his old age—will remain a significant part of the story. Victor’s first experience of the “most irreparable evil” of losing a loved one likely influences his obsessive need to understand the secrets of life and death.

Though reluctant to leave his family when he sets out for Ingolstadt, Victor says he “ardently desired the acquisition of knowledge”—a desire that has been with him throughout his youth and that will soon become an all-consuming obsession. Victor attributes the events of his life to fate when he says he is directed to his natural philosophy professor M. Krempe by “Chance—or rather, the evil influence, the Angel of Destruction, which asserted omnipotent sway over me from the moment I turned my reluctant steps from my father’s door.” Victor has been avoiding natural philosophy ever since he realized the medieval theories could never hold up to modern science, and M. Krempe’s “repulsive countenance” and harsh condemnation of the alchemists do not encourage him to take up the subject again. More than anything, however, Victor is motivated to avoid natural philosophy by his belief that modern scientists, rather than looking for something glorious like the elixir of life, are engaged in nothing more than dismissing all the grand ideas that interested him in science in the first place. When Victor hears the much more likeable M. Waldman lecture on the “miracles” that have been achieved and the “almost unlimited powers” that have been gained by modern chemists, however, his seemingly unavoidable passion for science is rekindled. M. Waldman speaks about chemistry in terms similar to those in which Victor recounts his initial fascination with the alchemists: although they have disproved the possibility of transmuting metal into gold or brewing an elixir of life, modern scientists “penetrate into the recesses of nature”; they “command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows.” Victor is intoxicated by the possibility of attaining and even surpassing these godlike powers. *Frankenstein* takes place during the Age of
Enlightenment—a time of prolific scientific experimentation and discovery—and the prevailing mood that anything might be possible through science is reflected in M. Waldman’s passionate lecture on chemistry and Victor’s enthusiastic response to it. It is worth noting that the Romantic movement, with which Mary Shelley is associated, was conceived in opposition to Enlightenment ideals.

Victor’s strong admiration of M. Waldman’s “benevolent” expression, “sweet” voice, eloquent words, “attractive” manners, and kind nature echo Walton’s admiration of similar qualities in Victor. Perhaps M. Waldman is the kind of man of science Victor could have become if destiny (as Victor sees it) had not had other plans. He refers to M. Waldman’s lecture as “the words of . . . fate” and says of the day he visits the professor’s home, “it decided my future destiny.” Perhaps most significant is M. Waldman’s statement that “The labours of men of genius, however erroneously directed, scarcely ever fail in ultimately turning to the solid advantage of mankind.” Victor certainly wants to gain personal glory from his scientific pursuits, but he also hopes to benefit humanity through his discoveries. Unfortunately, his single-minded ambition to “unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation” is about to horrific results. The fact that Victor struggles against his scientific ambition as though against “a palpable enemy” after hearing M. Waldman’s lecture provides further foreshadowing that Victor’s unstoppable ambition will lead to his tragic downfall.

Victor does not disclose the exact nature of the discovery he makes or of how he brings the creature to life, but many critics believe Shelley intends to imply that Victor uses galvanism, or stimulating dead bodies with an electric current. It is possible to interpret the lecture on galvanism that so impresses Victor in Chapter Two as foreshadowing his later application of the theory. Victor describes himself as being “animated by an almost supernatural enthusiasm” while building the creature, and though he believes he is doing work that will benefit society and bring him glory, this enthusiasm—or obsession—leads Victor to isolate himself and ignore his family, social life, and health, along with his ever-increasing anxiety and the “loathing” he sometimes feels for the grisly details of his work. Victor also ignores the beauty of nature that was so important to the Romantic tradition and to his own youthful happiness in Geneva. Instead, he tries to assert power over nature by manipulating the natural forces of life and death.

The moment it is brought to life, the creature’s ugliness leads Victor to see his creation as a monster or demon, one which he abandons without even giving it a name or attempting to interact with it. His dreams of glory and beneficence are crushed at the very moment they are realized, and his nightmare of turning Elizabeth into a corpse with his kiss foreshadows the further destructive consequences of his actions. When the creature appears at Victor’s bedside in the moonlight, Victor ignores the creature’s attempt to “detain” him with one outstretched hand and instead flees, thereby completely abandoning responsibility for his creation. It is significant that the creature appears in the light of the moon, with which he will remain associated throughout the novel. The “dismal” rain that falls from a “black and comfortless sky” while Victor wanders the streets of Ingolstadt in misery the next morning is one of Frankenstein’s many examples of the pathetic fallacy, or the attribution of human feelings to inanimate objects or elements of nature such as the weather—a literary technique frequently employed by the Romantics. And just as Walton did in an earlier letter to Margaret, Victor quotes Romantic poet Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” in his case to describe the “fear and dread” he felt while walking through Ingolstadt that night, knowing that “a frightful fiend / Doth close behind him tread.”

When Clerval arrives in Ingolstadt and nurses Victor back to health, Victor slowly finds himself reconnecting with everything he ignored during the two years he spent building the creature: friendship, happiness, and, as the dismal winter gives way to a “divine spring,” the natural world and the spiritual comfort it provides. He keeps the cause of his illness secret from Clerval, however, and still experiences terror at the thought of his creation.
Chapter Summaries: Volume 1: Chapters 6 and 7 Summary and Analysis

Victor reads a letter from Elizabeth in which she writes of how she has longed to hear from him and wished she could visit him during his illness. Apart from the family’s worries about Victor, life at home remains happy and peaceful. Alphonse is in good health, while Victor’s brother Ernest is now sixteen and hopes to pursue a career in the military. Elizabeth also writes at length about the family’s servant, a girl named Justine Moritz. The Frankensteins hired Justine when she was twelve years old, after the death of her father left her at the mercy of a mother who inexplicably hated her. Elizabeth reminds Victor that Justine was always a favorite of his, as well as of his mother, who Justine adored and emulated. Justine was heartbroken after Caroline’s death, and in the ensuing months, all of the serving girl’s siblings died as well. Madame Moritz believed this to be a punishment from God for the way she had treated Justine, whom she now summoned home. Justine, who Elizabeth says became less vivacious after Caroline’s death, reluctantly went to stay at her mother’s house, where she found herself alternately apologized to and blamed for her siblings’ deaths. When Madame Moritz eventually died, Justine returned to the Frankenstein home. Elizabeth praises Justine, who she says reminds her of Caroline. She also writes very fondly of Victor’s youngest brother, William; thanks Clerval for caring for Victor; and asks Victor to write to the family soon. Victor writes back right away to assure them he is recovering.

Once he is well enough to leave his apartment, Victor takes Clerval around Ingolstadt to meet various professors. This proves difficult for Victor, as he began to hate natural philosophy the night he fled from the creature and now finds even the sight of scientific instruments upsetting. He listens in misery as M. Waldman and M. Krempe talk about science and tell Clerval what a wonderful student Victor is. Victor’s professors notice how unhappy he looks during these conversations but assume he is simply too modest to enjoy their praise. Though Clerval notices Victor’s discomfort, Victor cannot bring himself to tell his friend about the creature he brought to life. Instead he spends the summer joining Clerval in learning Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit, a course of study Clerval hopes will help him in his future career. Victor finds this project a soothing distraction. He plans to return to Geneva at the end of autumn, but bad weather forces him to delay his departure until spring. Victor and Clerval spend the month of May on a walking tour of the surrounding countryside, and Victor finds his spirits lifted by the beauty of the scenery and the company of his friend. By the time they return to town, he is the happiest he has been in years.

Victor’s newfound happiness is crushed when, on returning to his apartment, he reads a letter from his father informing him that his youngest brother, William, has been murdered. The week before, the family had gone for a walk in Plainpalais and lost William when he ran off to hide while playing with Ernest. After searching for William all night, Alphonse found him lying dead on the grass with marks on his neck suggesting he had been strangled. Elizabeth had let William wear a valuable necklace with a miniature of Caroline on it that evening, and this necklace is now gone. Since it seems the murderer killed William in order to steal the necklace, Elizabeth blames herself for William’s death. Alphonse asks Victor to come home and comfort the family—particularly Elizabeth—in their grief.

Victor leaves for Geneva immediately. At first he is impatient to see his family for the first time in six years, but soon he begins to feel a sense of dread. Though his well-being is somewhat restored by the beauty of the landscape, it suffers again when he draws near his destination and has a premonition that he is destined for misery. When he arrives in Geneva, the city’s gates have already been shut for the night, so Victor takes a boat across the lake and walks through Plainpalais, determined to visit the spot where William died. A violent thunderstorm begins, illuminating the surrounding mountains and lifting Victor’s spirits. Suddenly, Victor sees a dark shape among the trees, and when a flash of lightning illuminates the area, he sees that the shape is the creature. As soon as he realizes this, Victor is certain that the creature is William’s murderer. When another flash of lightning strikes, he sees the creature scale nearby Mount Saleve before disappearing into the
darkness. It has been two years since Victor gave the creature life, and he is now overwhelmed with horror at what he has unleashed upon the world.

In the morning, Victor makes his way to his family’s house and resolves to tell them all he knows of the creature. After some reflection, though, he decides his story is too wild to be believed and that, even if people did believe him, it would be impossible to hunt the creature down. When he gets home he is greeted by his brother Ernest, who tells him that Justine Moritz has been accused of William’s murder. Victor is shocked to hear that anyone would believe Justine capable of such an act, but Ernest tells him a servant found the missing necklace in a pocket of the clothes Justine had been wearing the night of the murder. Certain the creature is really to blame, Victor remains unconvinced by this evidence and declares that he knows who the real murderer is. When Elizabeth and Alphonse join them, Elizabeth reveals that she too believes Justine to be innocent. Still resolved to keep his secret, Victor decides to remain silent and let Justine’s trial take its course, as he believes she will be acquitted.

Unfortunately, the trial does not unfold as Victor hopes. Justine tells the court that she was visiting her aunt in a nearby village on the night of the murder. While walking home, she encountered a man who told her that William was missing. Justine looked for William for several hours, then kept watch for him in the barn of a family she knew before briefly falling asleep. She was awakened by the sound of footsteps and spent the morning continuing to look for William. When questioned after her exhausting night by a woman near the spot where William had died, Justine’s answer was confused, a fact that is used as evidence against her. Justine is unable to explain how the necklace ended up in her pocket but humbly maintains her innocence. Not even Elizabeth’s passionate defense of Justine’s good character, however, can convince the court to ignore the evidence against her. Victor runs from the courtroom in an agony of remorse. He returns in the morning to discover that, to his horror, Justine has been found guilty. He is then shocked to learn that she confessed to the crime herself. Later that day, Justine asks to see Elizabeth, and Victor accompanies her to the prison.

Elizabeth is extremely upset by the news of Justine’s confession, but Justine explains that she only confessed in order to obtain absolution from the priest, who threatened her with eternal damnation until she gave in. Justine now regrets the lie. Elizabeth is relieved and wants to save Justine, but Justine has already accepted her fate, placing her faith in God and heaven. She thanks Victor for visiting her and believing in her innocence. Meanwhile, Victor is overwhelmed by guilt and believes he is suffering a much greater agony and despair than either of the women. He and Elizabeth both appeal to the judges on Justine’s behalf, but Victor continues to believe his story would be dismissed as madness if he were to tell it, and Justine is hanged.

Victor is tormented by the knowledge that he has not only caused the deaths of two innocent people but also caused his remaining family members deep grief. Unfortunately, he tells Walton, William and Justine would not be the last victims of his “unhallowed arts.”

**Analysis**

Elizabeth’s description of Justine’s hardships and praise of her virtues establishes Justine as a sympathetic character beloved by the whole family, while her description of William emphasizes his innocence and sweetness. In these ways Elizabeth’s letter foreshadows the importance of the roles Justine and William will come to play in the plot. It also emphasizes the goodness and innocence of Victor’s whole family, who have no idea what he has been up to and whom he neglected while immersed in his experiment. The harmonious familial relationships and tranquility they enjoy in Geneva—and which Victor enjoyed before leaving for Ingolstadt—contrast sharply with the obsessive, gruesome, solitary work in which Victor was engaged for two years while building the creature.

Although Victor has regained his physical health, it is clear from his reaction to his professors’ praise that he has not fully recovered from the horror of having brought a “monster” to life. Natural philosophy, once Victor’s greatest passion, is a subject that now causes him nothing but anguish. Rather than sharing his secret,
Victor seeks relief in the pleasant distraction of studying foreign languages with Clerval. Even more uplifting is the walking tour the friends take together, by the end of which Victor has been restored to his old self, or so he believes. During their trip, Clerval helps Victor to once again feel “ecstasy” at the “divine” beauty of nature—an ability highly prized by the Romantics—and entertains him by reciting poetry and making up fantastic stories as he did during their childhood. He is exactly the kind of friend Walton longs for: one to provide him with much-needed balance and support, sympathize with his Romantic nature, draw him out of his isolated and obsessive pursuits, and help him become the best version of himself. On the other hand, Clerval’s caring and accepting behavior toward Victor is entirely unlike Victor’s irresponsible behavior toward his creation.

Distracting himself, attempting to forget about the creature, and allowing himself to believe that things will be fine is behavior Victor will repeat several times throughout the novel. Unfortunately, his happiness is swiftly destroyed each time he regains some measure of optimism, just as it is when he receives news that William, the very embodiment of innocence, has been murdered. The Romantic motif of finding solace in nature recurs during Victor’s journey to Geneva, when he delights in the sight of the mountains and lake even in the midst of his melancholy. When night falls, however, the natural world takes on an ominous aspect, and Victor has a premonition that he is “destined to become the most wretched of human beings.” These premonitions of future tragedy—which perhaps stem from suppressed pangs of guilt for past mistakes—will continue to haunt Victor.

The lightning motif and pathetic fallacy recur when Victor, exulting in the storm, sees the creature on Plainpalais during a flash of lightning. The creature, like nature itself, is portrayed as powerful, dangerous, and beyond controlling as he swiftly scales the vertical side of Mont Saleve, a feat beyond human strength and agility. Victor is immediately convinced that the creature is William’s murderer and is forced to remember how he formed such a “filthy daemon” and turned him loose on the world. Even when he learns Justine has been accused of the murder, however, Victor refuses to divulge his secret for fear of being thought insane. Instead he chooses to remain passive, telling himself that Justine will be acquitted. In this way he continues to avoid taking responsibility for the consequences of abandoning his creation.

Victor’s narration foreshadows further tragedy when he describes William and Justine as “the first hapless victims to my unhallowed [unholy] arts.” Addressing his friends and family as they were at the time of William and Justine’s deaths, he says, “Ye weep, unhappy ones; but these are not your last tears!” and laments the fact that their “sad torments” will not be over until their deaths.

**Chapter Summaries: Volume 2: Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis**

Tormented by guilt and remorse after Justine’s death, Victor sinks into despair. His father tries to console him, but Victor’s terrible secret prevents him from taking any comfort in Alphonse’s words. After the Frankensteins retire to their country house in Belrive, Victor spends his nights alone on Lake Geneva. He often thinks of drowning himself but is unwilling to abandon his family to the malice of the creature. Victor’s only hope now lies in the thought of avenging William and Justine’s deaths by destroying his creation. Elizabeth, too, has fallen into a state of depression and disillusionment. Nevertheless, she attempts to comfort Victor and dissuade him from thoughts of revenge. Not even Elizabeth’s kind words, however, can bring Victor comfort, and instead he feels only fear that he might one day lose her.

One August day, Victor impulsively embarks on a journey toward the Alpine valley of Chamonix, hoping to find relief from his torment in the majesty of nature. About two months have passed since Justine’s execution.
As he rides through the mountains and into the glacial valley, Victor finds his spirits lifted by the scenery, which he remembers from his childhood. His fear of the creature drops away as he contemplates the impressive scenery, which he regards as evidence of God’s omnipotence. Even so, he is still intermittently gripped by despair. Eventually he reaches the village of Chamonix, where he watches a lightning storm above Mont Blanc from the window of his room at the inn before falling into an exhausted sleep.

Victor spends a peaceful day roaming the beautiful valley, but the following morning he wakes up feeling melancholy. Though heavy rain and mist now obscure the mountains, he decides to ride out alone toward the summit of Montanvert. At one point, looking at his bleak surroundings, he thinks it would be better to be an animal than a human being. Around noon he arrives at the ascent, then crosses a glacier. As he pauses on the other side to take in the view, Victor feels his heart swell with joy and cries out to the “wandering spirits” of the mountains to either allow him this moment of happiness or take him away with them.

Just as he says this, Victor sees the creature coming toward him across the glacier. Though at first overcome with terror, he is quickly seized by rage and hatred. Addressing his creation as “Devil,” Victor threatens to avenge the deaths of his loved ones. The creature responds that he expected to be greeted by his creator in this manner, as all humans hate the “wretched,” and he himself is “wretched beyond any living thing.” He says he will leave Victor and his loved ones alone if Victor will comply with his conditions, but that if he refuses, the creature will continue to exact his revenge. At this Victor angrily attacks the creature, who easily moves out of the way. The creature tells Victor that, as his creator, he owes his creation fair treatment and even affection. Though the suffering and loneliness he has endured have made him a “fiend,” the creature says that he was originally loving and benevolent. He promises to return to become that way again if Victor will listen to his story and grant him his request. Moved by a combination of curiosity and compassion, Victor agrees to follow the creature to his hut, as he feels it is his duty to hear his creation’s tale.

Analysis

When he first discovered the secret to instilling life, Victor naively envisioned himself as the beloved creator of a happy new species. Now, however, he finds himself responsible for the destruction of two innocent lives and the grief of his remaining family members. With Victor’s suffering, the meaning of Frankenstein’s subtitle—The Modern Prometheus—begins to become clear. In Greek myth, Prometheus was a Titan who created and cared for the human race. For his crime of stealing fire from the gods and giving it to human beings, Zeus condemned Prometheus to spend eternity chained to a rock while an eagle tore out his liver. Each night Prometheus’s liver grew back, and each day the eagle returned to tear it out again. When he first began his studies at Ingolstadt—and when he first began to build the creature—Victor imagined his work would make him, like Prometheus, a benefactor of humanity as well as the benevolent creator of a new race of beings. His “theft” of the ability to create life from nature or God can be compared to Prometheus’s theft of fire from Mount Olympus. Unlike Prometheus, Victor abandons the being he creates, but he suffers similar consequences for his daring: a long, slow, tortuous tearing away of his loved ones and an unbearable sense of guilt and remorse. As is foreshadowed at the end of Volume One, each time Victor recovers somewhat from his loss, his torment is rekindled by a new tragedy—just as each time Prometheus recovered from his wound, his punishment was repeated.

Victor’s deep emotions, contemplation of suicide, and quest for emotional healing in the rugged majesty of the Alps all fit into the Romantic tradition that influenced Mary Shelley. The rapture Victor feels amid the imposing mountains and glaciers of Switzerland echoes Walton’s passion for the stark beauty of the Arctic. For the Romantics, nature was divine, and Victor says the scenery around him “spoke of a power mighty as Omnipotence.” While Victor aspired to attain godlike powers by creating the “daemon,” he now takes comfort in the feeling of being surrounded by evidence of an all-powerful Creator: “I ceased to fear, or to bend before any being less almighty than that which had created and ruled the elements, here displayed in their most
terrific guise.” Interestingly, the Romantic view of nature as “sublime” (a word Victor uses to describe his surroundings several times in the text) was largely a reaction to the rationalization of the natural world that arose along with the rapid scientific advancement that characterized the Age of Enlightenment—the period during which Frankenstein takes place. Victor decided after seeing the oak tree struck by lightning that natural philosophy was pointless because nature was essentially unknowable, and his abandonment of his studies brought him peace. His obsessive ambition to reveal and master nature’s secrets at Ingolstadt, however, has brought him only misery. The naive belief he once had in his ability to achieve greatness has been lost, and as Victor climbs Montanvert, he even thinks it might be better to be an animal (a “brute”) than a man—a sentiment that will later be echoed by the creature. The poem Victor quotes to illustrate the ever-changing, unpredictable nature of human life, “Mutability,” was written by Mary Shelley’s husband, Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. The idea that human beings can be swayed, as Victor puts it, “by every wind that blows and a chance word or scene that that word may convey to us,” fits with the impulsive nature of Victor’s past and future actions.

Just as Victor is starting to feel a sense of joyful exultation in his surroundings, the creature appears, just as he did when Victor exulted in the thunderstorm in Plainpalais. This time, though, the creature is deliberately seeking Victor out. Victor notes that the creature wears an anguished expression, but he ignores this, determined without ever having even spoken to his creation to fight him to the death and addressing him as “Devil.” The creature compares himself to Satan and Victor to God when he says, “Remember, that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed.” John Milton’s epic poem Paradise Lost, which retells the biblical story of Satan’s temptation of Adam and Eve, will later be seen to have played a major part in the creature’s sense of self, and this will not be the last time the creature laments that Victor’s abandonment has left him more like Satan than Adam. The creature’s claim that he was originally benevolent but was made a “fiend” by misery, maltreatment, and alienation introduces the theme of nature versus nurture and the Romantic idea that people are born good. The isolation imposed upon the creature by his physical appearance—and Victor’s abandonment—mirrors the isolation Victor has imposed upon himself by keeping his terrible secret from his family. In this scene, the creature appears to be the more rational and eloquent one, beseeching his creator to listen to his story while Victor responds with rage and insults. The creature points out Victor’s hypocrisy when he observes that Victor created him only to now be prepared to kill him with a clear conscience. “How dare you sport thus with life?” he asks. In the creature’s view, he and Victor are bound together in a way that can only be undone by one of their deaths. When Victor at last agrees to listen to the creature’s tale, it is because he has begun at last to take some measure of responsibility for the creature’s existence and abandonment and to think about a creator’s duties toward his creation.

**Chapter Summaries: Volume 2: Chapters 3, 4, and 5**

**Summary and Analysis**

In Volume Two, Chapter Three, the creature assumes the role of narrator as he tells Victor his story.

When he is first brought to life, the creature is overwhelmed by sensations he doesn’t understand. Seeking relief from the sunlight and heat that plague him on the first morning of his life, he walks out of Ingolstadt into the forest, where he drinks from a stream and eats berries. When night falls, the clothes he had put on in Victor’s apartment prove insufficient to protect him from the cold. He weeps until he is comforted by the sight of the rising moon and the discovery of a cloak under a tree. As the days pass, the creature gains knowledge and understanding of his surroundings. He discovers the beauty of birdsong and is frightened by the sound of his own voice. He also discovers an abandoned campfire, which he learns can burn him as well as be used for warmth and cooking. Eventually the creature is forced to leave the fire in search of more food. He sets out through the woods, crosses a snow-covered field, and arrives at a small hut where he finds an old man cooking breakfast. To the creature’s surprise, the old man screams and runs away. The creature is enthralled
with the hut, however, and rests there after eating the old man’s food. Even more amazing to him is the village he discovers after leaving the hut. Unfortunately, when he enters one of the cottages there, the creature’s appearance causes the children inside to scream and a woman to faint. Some of the other villagers run away, but others attack the creature, throwing stones at him until he escapes into the woods. The creature then takes shelter from the weather and “the barbarity of man” in a low wooden hovel attached to a small cottage.

The next morning, the creature discovers that the hovel is enclosed by a pigsty and a pool of water. After stealing a loaf of bread and a cup to drink from, he crawls back into the hovel and covers the opening by which he entered with wood and stones so that whoever lives in the cottage won’t be able to see him. Compared with the forest, the warm, dry hovel is “a paradise.” After eating his breakfast, the creature peers through a crack in the wall at a young woman walking by with a milk pail balanced on her head. When she returns, a young man takes the pail from her. Though the woman looks sad, the man looks even sadder. He leaves the cottage some time later, taking a handful of tools into the field, while the woman continues to attend to various chores. The creature then discovers a crack in the wall adjoining the cottage through which he can see inside the cottagers’ home. There, in a clean but bare room, he sees a kindly-looking old man sitting by the fire. The young woman sits down beside him, and he begins to play a beautiful, melancholy tune on a guitar. When the woman starts to cry, the old man comforts her, and the creature is overwhelmed with unfamiliar emotions. A short while later the young man returns with a load of firewood, and the woman makes soup while he works in the garden. After the cottagers eat dinner together, the old man leans on the young man’s arm as they walk in the sunlight. When night falls, the creature is amazed by the cottagers’ use of candles and listens uncomprehendingly as the young man reads aloud.

For the next several months the creature continues to hide in the hovel and observe the cottagers. He learns that the young man and woman are a brother and sister named Felix and Agatha, and that the old man, their father, is blind. To the creature’s eyes, the family seems to possess everything anyone could want—a comfortable shelter, food, fire, and, most of all, love and companionship—but he often sees Felix and Agatha crying. When he realizes the family suffers from poverty and hunger, the creature gathers roots and berries for himself in the forest at night rather than stealing their food. He even gathers firewood for the cottagers and clears the snow from their path, acts which the astonished family attributes to a “good spirit.” The creature is fascinated by the cottagers’ ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings to each other by speaking and reading, and he resolves to learn their language so that he might introduce himself to them. One day he sees his own reflection in a pool and is horrified to discover that he is a “monster,” totally unlike the cottagers, who he thinks are beautiful. Still, he hopes that when he does reveal himself, the family will be able to overcome their initial disgust with his appearance and come to love him for his gentle nature.

Winter comes to an end, and the creature delights in the beauty of spring. One day as he watches the siblings listen to their father play guitar, the creature notices that Felix seems even sadder than usual. Then a knock comes at the door, and Agatha goes outside to find a dazzlingly beautiful woman on horseback. When Felix sees the woman he is over­come with joy and, kissing her hand, calls her his “sweet Arabian.” His father and Agatha greet the woman warmly as well, and all their sadness seems to be dispelled by her arrival. The creature learns that the woman’s name is Safie and that she and the cottagers don’t speak each other’s languages. He follows along as Felix teaches Safie several words of his language, then listens as the young man converses about her with his father late into the night. The next day, Safie sings and plays the guitar so beautifully that it brings tears to the creature’s eyes.

Spring goes on, and life in the cottage continues much as before except that its inhabitants are happy. The creature spends his days learning the family’s language along with Safie and improves even more rapidly than she does. Felix reads to Safie from Volney’s Ruins of Empires, and from this book and Felix’s explanations the creature learns about human history and civilization. This new knowledge leads him to wonder about the nature of humanity, which seems to include both good and evil and inspires in him both admiration and loathing. Realizing that he is fundamentally different from the cottagers, the creature also wonders about his
own nature. He has no idea where he came from, knows of no one else like him, and is tormented by the idea that he might be a monster doomed to isolation, never to enjoy the affections the cottagers bestow on one another. He learns about the social hierarchy, gender roles, family relationships, and death, and the more knowledge he gains, the more loneliness he suffers. The creature thinks of the cottagers as his “protectors” in what he refers to as an “innocent, half-painful self-deceit.”

Analysis

The creature’s narrative becomes the third story-within-a-story in *Frankenstein*, as Walton tells Margaret the story told to him by Victor and to Victor by the creature. Essentially a full-grown newborn left to his own devices, the creature begins his life in a state of utter confusion. His progress mirrors that of the human race as he gradually comes to understand more about his surroundings and, in another allusion to the Prometheus myth, to discover fire, which can be seen as representing knowledge. The creature discovers that fire has the potential to be both beneficial and harmful. Unbeknownst to him, his creator, Victor, has already discovered a similar truth about scientific knowledge. The confusion and suffering the creature endures after being abandoned by Victor is pitiable and contrasts sharply with Victor’s view of his creation as a malevolent fiend. The creature’s appreciation of the beauty of birdsong and the moon mirrors Victor’s own love of nature while showing the creature’s sensitivity and initial innocence, while his fear of his own voice foreshadows the painful self-awareness the creature will come to develop—and the self-loathing he will come to feel. The wonder the creature feels when he watches the moon rise for the first time furthers the association between himself and the moon that began the night Victor brought him to life.

The creature unwittingly embarks on the path to becoming the “monster” who murders William when he enters the old man’s hut and is surprised to see its inhabitant scream and run away. This is the first sign the creature receives that his appearance is frightening, although he doesn’t understand this at the time. The old man’s behavior toward the creature echoes Victor’s and foreshadows the way people will continue to react to the creature in the future. Likewise, the creature’s surprise at the old man’s reaction, unthinking eating of the old man’s breakfast, and fascination with the humble cottage illustrates the creature’s innocence. Alluding to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*—an important reference point for the creature throughout *Frankenstein*—the creature tells Victor the hut “presented to me then as exquisite and divine a retreat as Pandaemonium [hell’s capital city] appeared to the daemons of hell after their sufferings in the lake of fire.” With the villagers’ violent response to him the next day, however, the creature begins to lose his innocence, to fear showing himself to humans, and to catch a glimpse of the “barbarity of man.” The hovel in the forest becomes his “paradise” and his refuge from this barbarity. Although he has very little experience of interacting with human beings (and none, so far, that are positive), the creature is a keen and sympathetic observer of the cottagers: he notices their sadness, gentleness, and kindness, and he finds them beautiful. Rather than immediately becoming bitter toward humanity based on his treatment by the villagers, the creature instead comes to deeply admire the cottagers. This suggests that the creature is no mere “fiend” or “daemon” with an inherently malevolent nature as Victor seems to believe, but a person of deep feeling and great sensitivity who is overwhelmed by the beauty of the old man’s “divine” music and by the mingled “pain and pleasure” of watching the old man comfort Agatha. That night the creature hears, without understanding, a book read aloud for the first time, which hints at the importance books and reading will soon take on in his life.

The creature’s admiration of and love for the cottagers continues to grow as he watches them. “I longed to join them, but I dared not,” he says, as he remembers how he was treated by the villagers. To the creature, the cottagers’ lives look wonderful, but he realizes they are unhappy. The fact that he is “deeply affected” by their suffering shows that the creature feels the strong emotions that were so important to the Romantics. When the creature realizes that the cottagers are poor and that the younger two often go hungry so the old man can eat, he stops stealing their food and starts gathering firewood for them and clearing snow from their path. At this point the creature appears to be kind-hearted, altruistic, and eager to “restore happiness” to the cottagers and
to avoid causing them pain—a far cry from the fiend Victor believes him to be. Indeed, the cottagers, who know the creature by his kind actions alone, think of him as a “good spirit,” and the creature’s compassion for the cottagers’ poverty echoes the concern Victor’s parents showed for the poor. Like Victor, the creature is also intelligent and curious, as illustrated by his desire to learn the “godlike science” of language and his rapid progress when he follows along as Felix teaches French to Safie, along with his naïve but thoughtful response to what he learns from *Ruins of Empires*. Demonstrating his capacity for empathy, the creature says of the cottagers, “When they were unhappy, I felt depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathised in their joys.” Victor, on the other hand, still finds it extremely difficult to empathize with a being he himself created. Largely out of a desire for fame, glory, and ultimate knowledge, he created a living being, only to immediately reject and abandon that being and decide it was a evil simply because it was ugly. While recovering from his illness, Victor thought only of his own suffering, never of the suffering he might have inflicted on the creature. Instead, he tried to forget what he had done, and his selfishness resulted in tragedy. Though Victor does feel some compassion for the creature when he agrees to go to his hut, his feelings toward his creation are still dominated by hatred and anger, and his emotions and actions now contrast with the love and kindness the creature feels for the cottagers.

When the creature sees his reflection in a pool of water, he understands, to his horror, why people are so afraid of him: “When I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification.” Seeing himself how the world sees him, the currently harmless creature internalizes the perception of himself as a monster—and eventually will come to embody that perception through his actions. “Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity,” he tells Victor. In addition to deeply upsetting him, this incident plants a seed of self-loathing in the creature’s mind. At this point he still believes that the “superior beings” in the cottage might come to love him in spite of his ugliness, but in the way he speaks about himself to Victor—calling himself a “foolish wretch,” for instance—it is evident that the creature has come to hate himself. For now, though, he still innocently hopes to win the cottagers’ hearts, growing more confident in his mastery of their language all the time. The creature’s soaring optimism at the beginning of spring echoes Victor’s own after his spring walking tour with Clerval, and he displays a similar Romantic love of nature: “My spirits were elevated by the enchanting appearance of nature; the past was blotted from my memory, the present was tranquil, and the future gilded by bright rays of hope, and anticipations of joy.”

Learning about human history from *Ruins of Empires* and Felix’s comments on it is fascinating but troubling to the creature. “Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base?” he wonders. At first he doesn’t understand how one person could murder another, but as he hears more, he recognizes that humans have the capacity for both good—which fills him with admiration—and evil—which fills him with “disgust and loathing.” The creature is shown to be particularly empathetic when, along with Safie, he is moved to tears by what he learns about the genocide committed by European settlers against the indigenous peoples of the Americas. (This detail also echoes an earlier statement by Victor that the Americas should have been “discovered more gradually.”) The creature’s reactions to what he learns demonstrate the Romantic idea that people are born good, while evil is the result of harsh treatment by society. It also furthers the theme of the price or dangers of knowledge, a theme that runs through Victor’s side of the story and that relates to the story of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from paradise, which is retold in *Paradise Lost*. Like Adam when he eats the forbidden fruit, the creature gains knowledge of good and evil, but the knowledge brings him suffering and costs him his innocence. What the creature learns about human societies and families makes clear to him just how alone he is in the world, and his “sorrow only increased with knowledge.” Like Victor when he thinks it would be better to be an animal than a human, the creature wishes he had never left his “native wood” or felt human emotions. The loneliness imposed on the creature is a torment to him, and he longs more than anything to join the web of human relationships and experience the love and affection the cottagers enjoy. “What am I?” he wonders. Without a relationship to any other being, the creature strongly feels the lack of an identity or purpose. His anguish at being without friends or family not only contrasts with the happiness of the loving family in the cottage but with Victor’s idyllic upbringing.
It also echoes the ill effects that isolating himself from his loved ones has had on Victor, first in Ingolstadt when he was building the creature and now in Belrive as he suffers his secret alone. The creature’s longing draws attention to the importance of family and to the selfishness of Victor’s unwise decision to neglect his loved ones for years. Without the positive influence of Elizabeth, Clerval, and Alphonse, Victor’s worst traits—his selfishness and obsessiveness—went unchecked. Unlike Victor, the creature has no choice in his alienation from society; he longs for the support and affection that has been denied him by Victor’s rejection and by human beings’ prejudice against physical deformity.

Chapter Summaries: Volume 2: Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9
Summary and Analysis

In Chapter Six, the creature learns the cottagers’ story. The family’s last name is De Lacey, and until a few months before the creature’s arrival they enjoyed a life of wealth and comfort in Paris, where Felix and Agatha’s father, whom the creature refers to as De Lacey, was a respected politician. One day, Felix happened to be present at the trial of a Turkish merchant who was wrongfully sentenced to death. The sentence caused widespread outrage, and Felix was so horrified that he resolved to save the merchant. He visited the man’s cell by night and informed him that he planned to help him escape. The merchant promised to reward him, but Felix refused until he met the merchant’s daughter, Safie, who had arrived from Constantinople the same day her father was arrested. The merchant saw that Felix was enchanted with his daughter and promised him her hand in marriage. Felix declined out of politeness but still hoped the marriage would take place. While Felix planned her father’s escape, Safie sent him letters she wrote with the help of a French-speaking servant. (The creature still has copies he made of these letters and promises to give them to Victor to prove his story.) Safie told Felix that her mother was an Arab Christian who was sold into slavery before marrying Safie’s father, who is Muslim. Before Safie’s mother died, she raised her daughter as a Christian and taught her to aspire to an independent and intellectual life. Safie now dreaded the prospect of returning to Turkey, where she wouldn’t be able to enjoy the same freedoms she would in Paris. Nevertheless, she accompanied her father when he escaped from prison the night before his execution, aided by Felix, who conducted the two of them to the Tuscan port city of Leghorn. Safie’s father renewed his promise to allow his daughter and Felix to marry, and Felix remained with them while the merchant waited for an opportunity to cross the Turkish border. Meanwhile the two young people conversed through an interpreter and grew ever closer. Secretly, Safie’s father was opposed to the idea of his daughter marrying a Christian, but he continued to deceive the lovers out of fear that Felix might betray his whereabouts to the French government.

Not long after their arrival in Leghorn, Felix received news that the government had discovered his plot and that his father and Agatha, who had hidden themselves in a remote corner of Paris, had been imprisoned. He returned to Paris hoping to free them by turning himself in, first arranging for Safie to stay at a convent in Leghorn if her father should have an opportunity to return to Turkey while Felix was away. Felix and his family ended up spending five months in prison before being exiled from France with their fortune confiscated. They took refuge at the cottage in Germany, where Felix received an insultingly small amount of money from the merchant along with the devastating news that he and his daughter had left Italy. In reality, believing his whereabouts to have been found out, the merchant had suddenly sailed for Constantinople alone, leaving Safie in the care of a servant until she could follow with the rest of his things. Safie, however, was outraged by her father’s command to forget the now-impoveryed Felix, and she had no intention of returning to Turkey. When she learned of Felix’s exile, she gathered her money and jewels and left for Germany with her attendant, a Turkish-speaking girl from Leghorn. In a town not far from the De Lacey’s cottage, her attendant fell ill and died in spite of Safie’s attempts to nurse her back to health. Luckily, Safie knew the name of the cottage’s location, and the woman who lived in the house where she had been staying ensured that Safie arrived there safely. When the creature learns this story he is deeply affected, regarding it as further evidence of the cottagers’ goodness.
One August night in the forest, the creature finds a trunk containing clothes and books. He takes the trunk back to his hovel and discovers that the books are French editions of *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch’s *Lives*, and the *Sorrows of Werter*. Through these books, the creature experiences new depths of emotion and learns a great deal about human beings. He greatly admires Werter, whose lofty feelings he can relate to, and he weeps at the young hero’s suicide without entirely understanding it. Though he finds himself in some ways similar to the characters in the novel, the creature is plagued by doubt about his own nature, which he knows to be essentially different from theirs. From Plutarch the creature learns of the rulers of ancient Greece and Rome, which further develops his love of virtue and hatred of vice (though he confesses to Victor that his understanding of these terms was limited at the time). *Paradise Lost* has the most significant effect on the creature. He sees himself as somewhat similar to Adam in that he is entirely alone in the world as Adam originally was, but very different in that Adam was created perfect and happy and was protected and educated by his creator. Instead, the creature often identifies more with the character of Satan because of the envy he feels for the happiness enjoyed by his “protectors.” Now that he is confident in his reading abilities, the creature also begins to read a journal he found in the pocket of the clothes he took from Victor’s room. In this journal Victor recorded every grotesque detail of how he formed the creature. As he reads of his origins, the creature is overcome by disgust and despair. He curses Victor for making him so hideous and alone, pointing out that even Satan had companions in his fellow fallen angels. Still, the creature is resolved to introduce himself to the cottagers, convinced that they will respond to his admiration of them with compassion.

As he waits for the right time to reveal himself, the creature observes several positive changes in the cottagers’ lives. Not only has Safie’s presence raised their spirits, but they now have servants whose help leaves the cottagers more time to enjoy themselves. The creature, however, grows more tormented all the time, resenting the fact that his creator has abandoned him and that, unlike Adam in *Paradise Lost*, he has no Eve to offer him sympathy. The onset of autumn brings him additional distress until he sees that the cottagers continue to be as happy as before, which only increases his longing to share in their affections. He decides he will introduce himself to Felix and Agatha’s father when the old man is alone in the cottage. Being blind, De Lacey won’t be frightened by the creature’s appearance.

One winter day the young people go for a walk, the servants go to a fair, and De Lacey sits alone in the cottage, deep in thought. The creature is extremely nervous about executing his plan, but eventually he gathers his courage and knocks at the door. He tells the old man he is a traveler in need of rest and is invited in. When De Lacey asks if the creature is French, the creature responds that he was educated by a French family and is on his way to ask protection of some nearby French friends. Though these friends are kind, and though the creature loves them and even performs acts of kindness toward them, he is terrified that they will think he means them harm and reject him as a monster. Sensing his guest’s sincerity, De Lacey asks the creature to tell him his story and offers to help him earn his friends’ trust. The creature is filled with gratitude, but when De Lacey asks him his friends’ names, the creature is so overwhelmed that he begins to weep. Just then he hears the young people returning and, grasping De Lacey’s hand, confesses that the old man and his family are the friends he spoke of. He begs De Lacey to protect him. When the young people enter the cottage, however, things do not go as the creature hoped. Agatha faints, Safie runs away, and Felix knocks the creature to the floor before hitting him with a stick. The creature escapes before Felix can strike him again, then returns to his hovel in anguish.

That night the creature wanders the woods, howling with rage and despair. Sinking to the ground, he vows to wage war on humanity and on Victor in particular. When the sun rises, however, he feels calmer and thinks that all might not be lost with the cottagers. He decides to try to talk to De Lacey again in the hope that old man will advocate for the creature to his children. After an afternoon nap troubled by nightmares about the previous day’s events, the creature returns to his hovel by night and waits for the cottagers to wake up. They never appear, however, and the cottage remains dark. Eventually the creature sees Felix approach the cottage along with the landlord. He learns from their conversation that the De Laceys have decided to abandon the cottage due to the shock of the previous day, which has endangered De Lacey’s life and left Safie and Agatha

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terrified. After Felix and the landlord leave, the creature never sees any of the De Laceys again. He spends the
day despairing in his hovel, where he experiences the feelings of hatred and revenge for the first time. That
night, in a fit of rage, he sets fire to the cottage and watches it burn.

The creature decides to make his way to Geneva, which Victor’s journal identifies as his hometown. Though
he feels nothing but hatred for his creator, the creature believes Victor is the only human being from whom he
can seek pity or justice. He spends the winter traveling by night, growing more bitter and vengeful all the
time. One beautiful morning in early spring, the creature decides to continue walking through the woods after
sunrise. Momentarily forgetting his misery, he begins to cry tears of happiness. At the edge of the woods he
comes to a river, where he sees a young girl slip and fall into the water. The creature rescues her, but as he
attempts to revive her on the shore, a man appears and tears the girl away. The man flees back into the woods
and, without quite knowing why, the creature follows. The man responds by turning around and shooting him
in the shoulder with his gun. Enraged at being repaid for his good deed in this manner, the creature renews his
vow to seek vengeance on humanity. He spends the next several weeks recovering in the forest while
contemplating revenge.

The creature reaches the countryside around Geneva about two months after recovering from his injury. While
resting from his travels he sees a small boy run by. Reasoning that the boy must be too young and innocent to
fear his ugliness, the creature decides to make the child his friend. As soon as the creature grabs him,
however, the boy screams, calls him a monster, and threatens him with retribution from his father—M.
Frankenstein. Realizing the boy is related to Victor, the creature strangles William, then exults in his new
ability to make his creator suffer. The creature is attracted by the miniature of Caroline that William wears
around his neck and takes it with him, although the thought of how the woman in the miniature would fear
and shun him fills him with rage. After he leaves William’s body on the grass, the creature comes to a barn,
where he sees a young woman sleeping on the straw. Incensed by the thought that he will never receive
affection from this or any woman, the creature places the necklace in the young woman’s clothes. This way,
the creature thinks, she will be rightly (in his opinion) forced to pay for a crime he committed because of the
loneliness inflicted on him by people like her. For several days the creature lurks near the scene of his crime,
then wanders into the mountains, where he encounters Victor. Now, sitting with Victor in his hut, the creature
finally puts his request to his creator: He wants Victor to create him a female companion who, being as
hideous as the creature himself, won’t be able to refuse his love.

Victor is initially bewildered by the creature’s request. While his anger toward the creature receded during the
first part of the creature’s tale, he is now overcome with rage at the description of the creature’s crimes against
William and Justine, and he says that nothing could convince him to create another evil being like the
creature. The creature argues that he only commits evil deeds because he is treated so cruelly and vows to
utterly destroy Victor’s life if Victor doesn’t do what he asks. He explains that he would gladly show kindness
to any human being who showed him the same, but that he knows this can never be; his only hope of ever
experiencing sympathy lies in Victor creating him a companion. Victor is moved, though he remains
apprehensive. The creature promises that if Victor grants his request, he and his mate will journey to South
America, where they will live a peaceful life far away from humankind. Victor becomes skeptical. If the
creature longs for human sympathy, he says, he will inevitably seek out people again and respond to their
rejection with violence, this time with the help of his companion. Victor refuses to be responsible for this, but
the creature swears his “evil passions” will disappear when he has a mate. Though Victor finds himself unable
to truly sympathize with the creature, who still inspires feelings of disgust and hatred in him, he feels he has
no right to deny his creation this one chance at contentment. After reflecting on the creature’s promises and
threats, Victor decides it is his duty to both his creation and his fellow humans—the creature’s potential
victims—to grant the creature’s request. He consents on the condition that the creature and his mate leave
Europe and every place where people live as soon as Victor has fulfilled his end of the bargain. The creature
agrees. He tells Victor he will be anxiously observing his progress, then rushes down the mountain and
disappears across the glacier. Depressed, Victor descends the mountain slowly, and as night falls he feels
oppressed by his surroundings. In the morning he goes straight to Geneva, where his family is alarmed to see how haggard he looks. For his part, Victor feels as though he no longer has a right to his family’s companionship. At the same time, it is his desire to save them from the creature’s wrath that propels him toward his new all-consuming goal.

Analysis

The cottagers’ story, which the creature tells in Chapter Six, forms the innermost story in *Frankenstein*’s nested series of narratives: the creature learns it from the cottagers and tells it to Victor, who tells it to Walton, who tells it to his sister. The creature says of what he learns, “It impressed me deeply. I learned, from the views of social life which it developed, to admire their [the cottagers’] virtues and to deprecate the vices of mankind.” His response shows his romanticization of the cottagers as well as the innocence and goodness he still possesses. The fact that the cottagers were exiled is perhaps part of the reason the creature feels a kinship with them: although they were originally respected and well-liked members of Parisian society, the De Laceys became outcasts when they were banished and deprived of their fortune, and now they are outsiders in rural Germany. Due to the unique circumstances of his “birth” and appearance, the creature may be more of an outsider than anyone on earth, and he fervently hopes these fellow outsiders will accept him into the happiness and love they have created for themselves in spite of being—like Adam and Eve, Satan, and the creature himself—rejected and exiled. The knowledge the creature has gained from the cottagers’ history (and, earlier, from *Ruins of Empires*) of how unjustly people can treat each other only increases his admiration for the cottagers, who he sees as superior both to himself and to other human beings.

Though he knows his appearance is almost certain to horrify the cottagers at first, the creature hopes to eventually be welcomed into their family as Safie has been. The beliefs with which Safie was raised by her Arab Christian mother made Safie an outsider in Turkey, just as her nationality and language made her an outsider in Paris, but the De Laceys have lovingly accepted her—as well as aided in her cultural assimilation by teaching her French. The De Laceys’ “adoption” of Safie into their family echoes the Frankensteins’ adoption of Elizabeth Lavenza, whose noble origins made her an outsider in the peasant family with whom she lived and who, though fully assimilated into the family almost at once, is different from the Swiss Frankensteins due to her Italian background and lack of blood relation to them. As a Muslim Turk, Safie’s father is an outsider as well, and the French government’s discomfort with his nationality, religion, and material success led him to be unjustly sentenced to death. Safie emerges as perhaps the strongest female character in *Frankenstein* when the creature recounts how she disobeyed her father and chose to reunite with Felix rather than return to Constantinople, reaching the De Laceys’ cottage only after a difficult journey through unfamiliar territory. (Elizabeth, in particular, appears passive and submissive to the men around her by contrast.) Safie’s story also reveals Mary Shelley’s Eurocentric cultural bias in that, as in most Western writing of the time, Christianity is portrayed as the religion of the enlightened and Europe as the land of the free, while Islam and the Middle East are characterized as rigid, confining, and desperately dissatisfying to Safie’s independent, intellectual nature. At the same time, Shelley condemns the prejudice the French government displays by “barbarically” sentencing Safie’s father to death on the basis of his nationality and faith—yet the wrongfully sentenced man ultimately turns out to be deceitful and cruel. Accepting otherness may be a moral obligation in *Frankenstein*, but only when that otherness can be readily assimilated into the prevailing cultural paradigm. While Safie is able to immediately and seamlessly fill the role of a wife to Felix, a sister to Agatha, and a daughter to De Lacey, the creature’s possible roles are much less clear. The unprecedented and grotesque nature of his origins renders him much more of a foreigner in relation to the De Laceys than Safie could ever be, and while Safie’s “angelic” beauty endears her to others at first sight, the creature’s “daemonic” deformity inspires only revulsion.

As he tells his story to Victor, the creature no longer has any hopes of being welcomed by Victor as Safie was by Felix and his family. The creature’s offer to show Felix and Safie’s letters to Victor, however, does display
his desire to prove he is telling the truth and thereby win some measure of trust and sympathy from his creator. The fact that Felix brings suffering on his family by helping Safie’s father to escape from prison echoes the suffering Victor brings on his family by creating and then abandoning the creature. Both are idealistic young men from wealthy families who pursue reckless schemes, but Felix’s family knows and apparently approves of his plan, while Victor’s family remains ignorant. Additionally, Felix’s scheme is initially motivated by a desire to right a wrong, while Victor’s is mainly motivated by a desire for personal glory.

The creature’s discovery of the books in the forest marks a crucial point in his development and understanding of himself and the world. He naively believes the books to be “true histories,” and his relationship with these texts forms yet another layer in the complex combination of narratives that comprises Frankenstein. The Sorrows of Werter (usually translated as The Sorrows of Young Werther in English) is a novel by German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe that influenced the later Romantic movement. The hero, Werter (or Werther), is a passionate and sensitive young artist who commits suicide after facing unrequited love and rejection by society. Though he considers Werter to be a “divine” and superior being, the creature relates to the character’s strong emotions, longing for love, and outsider status, while the “gentle and domestic manners” described in the novel remind the creature of the cottagers. The motif of suicide, which began with Victor’s suicidal thoughts following Justine’s execution, reappears when the creature weeps for Werter’s death and can be seen as an instance of foreshadowing, along with the fact that from the novel the creature learns about “despondency and gloom.” While reading Plutarch’s Lives, which explores the moral character of famous Greeks and Romans, the creature is introduced to “high thoughts” and further develops his own sense of morality. He feels a passionate admiration of peace and virtue and a horror of violence and vice, although he still has only a limited understanding of these concepts. The theme of nature versus nurture resurfaces when the creature reflects that his preference for the “peaceable lawgivers” described in Lives is due, at least in part, to the fact that he has learned about humanity from the peaceful cottagers. “Perhaps,” he says, “if my first introduction to humanity had been made by a young soldier, burning for glory and slaughter, I should have been imbued with different sensations.” In Shelley’s view, people may be born kind and gentle, but character is ultimately shaped by society and the way a person is treated.

English author John Milton’s epic poem Paradise Lost, which retells the biblical story of how God cast Satan out of Heaven and Adam and Eve out of Paradise, is the book that makes the deepest impression on the creature. His comparison of himself to both Adam and Satan is woven throughout the book, with Adam a model of what the creature feels he should have been to Victor but Satan ultimately a “more fitting emblem” of his state. Like Satan, the creature has been cast out by his creator, but as the creature points out multiple times in the novel, even Satan had the other fallen angels to keep him company in hell. In Frankenstein’s creature, Mary Shelley has created a character whose suffering and sense of rejection is greater even than Satan’s, because he is completely alone. The creature’s identification with Satan’s bitter envy of others’ happiness strikes an ominous chord that is further developed by the horror and despair he feels about his origins and abandonment when he reads Victor’s journal. Significantly, the creature yearns not only to be accepted by his creator but to be comforted by a female companion as Adam is by Eve. Like Adam and Eve, however, the creature has lost his innocence by learning about humanity’s capacity for both virtue and vice—metaphorically eating from the biblical Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. His alienated state is further emphasized by the fact that while the cottagers seem to be growing happier and closer with one another all the time, the creature is only growing lonelier and more anguished. When he finally gathers the courage to speak to De Lacey, the old man’s statement that, although he cannot see his guest’s face, he is convinced of the sincerity of the creature’s words and wishes to help him suggests that the creature is not inherently evil but a victim of human prejudice. De Lacey’s comforting words about the love and charity in unprejudiced hearts take on a sadly ironic tone when Agatha, Safie, and Felix return and, respectively, faint, run away, and attack the creature.
“Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live?” the creature asks when he confronts Victor on the glacier. “Why, in that instant, did I not extinguish the spark of existence which you had so wantonly bestowed?” These types of direct appeals to Victor keep the creature’s tale grounded in Victor’s own narrative and remind the reader that Victor is listening to the story in the creature’s hut in the mountains—or rather, listened and then retold the story to Walton, who retold it to Margaret. They also involve Victor in the tale and make explicit the fact that the creature holds Victor responsible for his suffering. The creature’s story rejoins Victor’s in Chapter Eight when he commits his first act of revenge against his creator—and his first murder—by strangling William in Plainpalais. Already bitter and miserable at having been shot after rescuing the young girl from the river—not to mention rejected by the cottagers and abandoned by Victor—the creature is now forced to realize that even an innocent-looking child is bound to react to him with fear and prejudice. This time the creature takes rather than saves a child’s life, and Victor and the reader receive confirmation that the creature is indeed William’s murderer. The rage and torment the creature displays at his inability to ever experience romantic love hints at the demand he makes at the end of the chapter: that Victor create him a mate. It also motivates him to frame Justine: “The thought was madness; it stirred the fiend within me—not I, but she, shall suffer; the murder I have committed because I am forever robbed of all that she could give me, she shall atone. The crime had its source in her: be hers the punishment!” He attributes his ability to commit this act to “the lessons of Felix and the sanguinary laws of man.”

The creature has lost his innocence and his belief in the goodness of humankind, and he now exults not in virtuous ideals but in his newfound power to make Victor suffer. The two options he offers Victor—that he will either live a completely peaceful life with his mate in the wilderness or utterly destroy Victor’s life—exemplify the human capacity for both good and evil that forms one of the novel’s central themes. “I am malicious because I am miserable,” the creature tells Victor. “Am I not shunned and hated by all mankind?” Here, Shelley has the creature argue in favor of the Romantic idea that evil is not inherent in human beings but results from being abused by society. At this point the creature has proven himself to have all the emotions, thoughts, and desires of not only a human being, but a human being at least as intelligent, passionate, flawed, and complicated as Victor himself, if not more so. For his part, Victor does feel some compassion for the creature, but he is unable to overcome his horror and hatred of the creature’s ugliness enough to truly sympathize with him; and while the creature has long contemplated the relationship between Victor and himself, this is the first time Victor has considered that he might have a duty toward the creature as his creator. As he climbs miserably back down the mountain, Victor no longer feels the presence of the natural world as a sublime source of joy and comfort but as an oppressive, destructive force. When he arrives in Geneva he finds himself even less able than before to take comfort in his family’s love, and his sense of isolation echoes the creature’s: “I felt as if I were placed under a ban—as if I had no right to claim their sympathies—as if never more might I enjoy companionship with them. Yet even thus I loved them to adoration.”

Chapter Summaries: Volume 3: Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

Several weeks pass, and Victor is still unable to gather the courage to begin work on the creature’s mate. He has heard of an English philosopher whose knowledge he believes would prove essential to his task, but he procrastinates on asking his father for permission to visit England. At the same time, Victor feels his health and mood improving, especially when he is able to temporarily forget about his promise to the creature. When his melancholy does return, he rows out alone on Lake Geneva and takes comfort in nature as he has so many times before. One day when he returns from the lake, his father approaches him and says he believes he has guessed the reason for Victor’s unhappiness. Reminding him that he and Caroline always hoped Victor and Elizabeth would marry, Alphonse asks Victor if his misery stems from feeling pressured to marry Elizabeth against his will. Victor assures his father that he loves Elizabeth and that all his future happiness depends on marrying her. Relieved, Alphonse asks if Victor would consider holding the wedding right away, as he
believes the marriage would help to dispel the gloom that lies over the family. Victor, however, doesn’t want to marry Elizabeth before he has freed himself from his deal with the creature. In addition, he still needs to travel to England and is horrified by the idea of conducting his grotesque work on the creature’s mate in the family home. Victor tells his father he wants to visit England before he marries but conceals his true motives for the journey. Alphonse gladly agrees, hoping the holiday will cure Victor of the last of his melancholy. He and Elizabeth arrange for Clerval to meet Victor in Strasburgh so that he won’t be alone. Although this interferes with the solitude he craves, Victor is glad he will have Clerval to distract him from his depressing thoughts and to prevent the creature from approaching him. It is agreed that Victor and Elizabeth will marry immediately upon his return, and Victor looks forward to a peaceful future with Elizabeth as the reward he will claim for all his suffering. Although Victor is troubled by a fear that the creature might attack his family while he is away, his intuition tells him the creature will most likely follow him to England.

At the end of August, Victor resignedly sets out for Strasburgh, where Clerval tries in vain to get him to share his delight in the beautiful scenery. As the two friends sail down the Rhine to Rotterdam, though, Victor begins to feel a sense of peace. To Walton, Victor praises Clerval’s devoted friendship, vivid imagination, and ardent love of nature. Although Clerval is dead by the time he tells Walton his story, Victor believes his friend’s spirit still visits and comforts him in his anguish. Returning to his tale, he then relates how he and Clerval continue down the Rhine to Rotterdam before sailing to England and up the River Thames.

In London, Victor reluctantly meets with natural philosophers whose discoveries are relevant to his work and gathers materials for his task. He finds this process tortuous and often seeks solitude even from Clerval, who is enthusiastically engaged in pursuing his plan to become involved in colonization and trade in India. After a few months, the friends receive a letter from a Scotsman who once visited them in Geneva and now invites them to his house in Perth. Victor decides that, once in Scotland, he will find a remote place where he can build the creature’s companion. He and Clerval leave London in March and spend the summer leisurely traveling north, spending time in Oxford, Cumberland and Westmorland, and Edinburgh. Despite the beauty and interest of his surroundings, Victor remains in almost constant misery. He still thinks the creature might attack his family in Switzerland and is haunted by a fear that the creature will murder Clerval out of anger that Victor has not yet begun his work. Though he considers himself essentially guiltless, Victor nevertheless feels as though he has committed a terrible crime. When they arrive in Perth, Victor tells Clerval he is going to tour Scotland by himself for a month or two. Clerval tries to dissuade him, but Victor is resolved to complete his work alone. He journeys to one of the remotest of the Orkney Islands, where he rents one of the island’s three dilapidated huts and is ignored by the five poverty-stricken locals. He spends his mornings working and his evenings walking on the desolate beach. The more he works, the more horrible his task seems to him, and he alternates between periods of frenzied labor and periods when he is unable to motivate himself to even enter his laboratory. Plagued by anxiety, Victor nevertheless makes progress on his task, the completion of which he looks forward to with a mixture of hope and dread.

**Analysis**

Just as he did after recovering from the illness that followed his creation of the creature, Victor is able to find temporary relief from his misery as long as he distracts himself from the reality of his situation: that he must now build the creature a companion or face dire consequences. “My spirits,” he says, “when unchecked by the memory of my unhappy promise, rose proportionably.” His attempts to forget his promise to the creature, while in some ways understandable, can also be seen as dangerously irresponsible. The extreme reluctance Victor feels toward his task continues to affect him when he begins to assemble the female creature in the Orkneys and can no longer hide from the reality of his situation.

Clerval serves as a foil for Victor in these chapters; the rapture Clerval expresses at the beauty of the scenery contrasts with Victor’s despondency and gloom. While Victor, too, once found a Romantic solace and joy in
nature, he now barely registers his surroundings. He calls himself a “miserable wretch”—the same words the creature used to describe himself. In London, he sees in Clerval “the image of my former self; he was inquisitive, and anxious to gain experience and instruction,” much as Victor was when he first began his studies at Ingolstadt. Clerval’s extroverted, cheerful, outwardly-focused activities in London contrast with Victor’s solitary, torturous pursuit of the materials and information necessary to his task. Several times he directly addresses Walton, telling the captain he would no doubt find Clerval’s journal much more amusing than his story and asking him to pardon his “gush of sorrow” when he laments Clerval’s death. These comments remind the reader that we are hearing Victor’s tale as recorded by Walton. Victor’s narrative also includes apostrophes to the dead Clerval, which indicate that Victor still has further disasters to describe and how emotionally affected he is by remembering his friend: “Clerval! Beloved friend! Even now it delights me to record your words, and to dwell on the praise of which you are so eminently deserving,” he says, and “Your form so divinely wrought, and beaming with beauty, has decayed, but your spirit still visits and consoles your unhappy friend.” Victor’s glowing description of Clerval coincides with Romantic ideals: Clerval “was a being formed in the ‘very poetry of nature,’ ” imaginative, overflowing with affection, physically beautiful, and passionate about the natural world. Victor even quotes “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” by Romantic poet William Wordsworth to illustrate Clerval’s love of nature. His description of Clerval as the ideal friend reminds the reader that it is exactly this kind of friendship that Walton longs for and believes he could have had with Victor.

When Walton unsuccessfully tries to convince Victor to start his life over, Victor says, “I am a blasted tree; the bolt has entered my soul.” His words recall the image of the oak tree struck by lightning that appeared in Chapter Two. Just as the oak was completely destroyed by an uncontrollable force of nature, Victor’s life has been completely destroyed by his attempt to control the natural forces of life and death. The image of the “blasted tree” is also significant because of its association with galvanism; the Frankenstein family’s house guest gave Victor a lecture on “electricity and galvanism” after witnessing the destruction of the oak tree, and it was this lecture that inspired Victor to temporarily abandon natural philosophy. Ironically, galvanism likely later played a part in Victor’s bringing to life the creature, whose appearance is often accompanied or foreshadowed by lightning.

Victor’s anxiety grows as he and Clerval approach Scotland. Although he acknowledges that he has been putting his loved ones in danger by neglecting his promise to the creature, Victor still considers himself blameless: “I felt as if I had committed some great crime, the consciousness of which haunted me. I was guiltless, but I had indeed drawn down a horrible curse upon my head, as mortal as that of crime.” His fear that the creature might murder Clerval is a significant one, and though he sometimes refuses to leave Clerval’s side due to this fear, Victor leaves his friend behind in Perth when he travels alone to the Orkneys. The “desolate and appalling landscape” of the island where Victor rents his hut reflects his bleak state of mind and contrasts with the idyllic scenery of Switzerland, which Victor associates with innocence and happiness. Deprived of any distractions, as well as of the enthusiasm that motivated him during his creation of the first creature, Victor becomes anxious and fearful. He looks forward to the completion of the female creature with “a tremulous and eager hope, which I dared not trust myself to question, but which was intermixed with obscure forebodings of evil, that made my heart sicken in my bosom”—foreshadowing to Walton and the reader that this will not be the end of Victor’s troubles.

**Chapter Summaries: Volume 3: Chapters 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis**

One evening as he sits in his laboratory, Victor begins to reflect on the possible consequences of creating a companion for the creature. He realizes that his second creation might turn out to be just as or even more malicious than his first. She might refuse to accompany the creature to South America, or the two creatures might hate each other. If they do go to the wilderness together, the creatures could have children and thereby
begin a new race of beings who would terrorize humankind. Victor is horrified by the idea that future
generations might hate him for jeopardizing the survival of the entire human race just to secure safety for
himself and his family. At that moment he sees the creature grinning malevolently at him through the window
of his hut, and he tears the unfinished female creature apart. The creature howls with despair before vanishing
into the night. Vowing never to resume his work, Victor leaves the laboratory. Several hours later the creature
returns to confront him for breaking his promise. Victor tells him he has resolved never to create another
being like the creature, no matter the consequences. The creature swears revenge and ominously tells Victor to
remember that he will be with him on his wedding night. After hearing the creature row away in a boat, Victor
paces around his room in torment, wishing he hadn’t allowed him to escape. Believing the creature intends to
murder him on his wedding night, he weeps for the pain his death will cause Elizabeth and vows not to die
without putting up a “bitter struggle.”

Victor spends the morning wandering aimlessly around the island in despair, eventually falling asleep on the
ground. When he wakes up in the evening he feels somewhat calmer. A fisherman delivers a letter from
Clerval, who asks Victor to meet him at Perth and travel with him back to London, where he plans to prepare
to sail for India. Victor decides to leave for Perth in two days. Late the next night he rows out to sea in a small
skiff and throws the remnants of the female creature’s body overboard in a basket weighted with stones.
Relaxed by the breeze and the sound of the waves, he stretches out in the bottom of the boat and falls asleep.
When he wakes up, the sun is up, and a strong wind has pushed him far out to sea, leaving him totally lost.
After several hours of drifting on the waves, convinced he will die and terrified of what the creature will do to
his family and friends, Victor is overjoyed to sight land. He steers into the harbor of the first town he sees.
While tying up his boat, he is surprised to be greeted with hostility by an angry-looking crowd. He learns that
he has arrived in Ireland and must report to the local magistrate, Mr. Kirwin, on suspicion of murder. Though
startled and fatigued, Victor complies, sure that he will easily prove his innocence.

Mr. Kirwin brings forth several witnesses, the first of whom explains that he and his son and brother-in-law
returned from fishing late last night and discovered the still-warm body of a young man on the beach. The
man appeared to have been strangled, a detail which causes Victor to grow weak with fear. The first witness’s
brother-in-law then swears that, just after the discovery of the body, he saw a man in the same boat in which
Victor arrived. A woman who lives near the beach further attests that she saw a man sail from the area where
the body was discovered about an hour before the fishermen returned. Another woman describes how the men
brought the strangled young man to her house, where they tried to revive him without success. Several other
witnesses reason that Victor, unaware there was a town nearby, probably brought the body from someplace
else and left it on the beach before being forced by the wind to sail back to nearly the same spot. Although he
is surprised by this series of coincidences, Victor remains calm until he is taken to see the corpse, which he is
horrified to find is that of Clerval. Victor flings himself on Clerval’s body and cries out that he has murdered
not only his best friend but two other victims besides. Overwhelmed, he begins to convulse and is carried
away.

Victor is then thrown in prison, where he lies delirious with fever. During this time he raves about his murder
of Clerval, William, and Justine; begs the prison attendants to help him kill the creature; and screams in terror
as he hallucinates that the creature is about to strangle him. After two months he emerges from his delirium
and slowly begins to recover. Mr. Kirwin has arranged for Victor to live in the prison and to be treated by a nurse and a physician. Just as Victor is considering pleading guilty to the murder, Mr. Kirwin
visits and tells Victor he believes he is innocent. The magistrate further reveals that he wrote to Geneva after
finding a letter from Alphonse among Victor’s things. To Victor’s surprise, Alphonse is then brought into the
cell. Seeing his father gives Victor the strength to regain some of his physical health, although he is still
steeped in anguish over Clerval’s murder, and he often wishes for death. After three months in prison he is
given a private trial and proven innocent by evidence that he was on the Orkneys at the time of the murder.
Alphonse is overjoyed at his son’s release, but Victor, too depressed to imagine ever being happy again, reacts
with indifference to his freedom. He continues to suffer from fever and to contemplate suicide. Only his desire
to protect his family and to destroy the creature motivates him to continue living, and in spite of his ill health he urges his father to book them immediate passage to Geneva. The first night of the voyage, Victor goes up on deck by himself. As he gazes at the stars, he thinks back on his life so far and weeps before swallowing double his normal dose of laudanum, which he has been taking every night since he first awoke from his delirium. The next morning he awakens from a nightmare about the creature but, reassured by being at sea with his father, allows himself to take comfort in a feeling of security.

**Analysis**

Victor begins to seriously consider the possible consequences of fulfilling his promise to the creature for the first time in Volume Three, Chapter Three. While he once looked forward to receiving the world’s gratitude and admiration for his scientific discoveries, he now fears that “future ages might curse me as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace at the price, perhaps, of the existence of the whole human race.” That his actions might be selfish is an idea that has not registered with Victor until now. While he ruminates, the creature appears in the moonlight at the window, confirming Victor’s fears of being approached by his creation as well as continuing the moonlight motif associated with the creature. Victor makes up his mind to destroy his unfinished work upon seeing the creature’s “ghastly grin.” It seems that, ultimately, Victor cannot look at the creature’s deformed face—which he himself created—without becoming convinced of the creature’s malevolence.

Although it follows a period of serious contemplation, the suddenness and violence of Victor’s destruction of the female creature continues his pattern of acting impulsively on his emotions: “I thought with a sensation of madness on my promise of creating another like to him, and trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged.” In so doing, he destroys the creature’s last hope of ever finding contentment. The creature reminds Victor of the suffering and loneliness he has been made to endure, but Victor reacts without sympathy, addressing his creation as “Devil” and “Villain.” The creature calls Victor “Slave” and asserts that although Victor is his creator, he is Victor’s master and has the power to make him suffer. It is clear from the creature’s promises of revenge that, by betraying the creature and denying his one request, Victor has ensured his own ruin. Given the creature’s bitterness at being a denied a mate, however—and that his strategy so far has been to take vengeance on Victor by killing his loved ones—the reader might question Victor’s interpretation of the creature’s statement “I shall be with you on your wedding-night.” As he wanders the dismal island the next day, the painful sense of isolation Victor feels is not unlike the creature’s own. When Victor says he must pause and collect himself before relating the “frightful events” following his arrival at Mr. Kirwin’s house, Mary Shelley not only creates a deep sense of foreboding but draws attention to the fact that Victor’s story, told aloud to and recorded by Walton, is being transmitted to the reader as a narrative within a narrative.

By the end of Chapter Four, Victor’s relationship to humanity has come to parallel the creature’s: he views other people as beings of a higher order and no longer feels worthy of interacting with them, believing he would be hated if the truth about his part in the creature’s crimes were to come to light. In causing the deaths of William, Justine, and now Clerval, the creature has successfully begun to inflict on Victor the same terrible sense of alienation he himself has been forced to endure. Clerval was, in many ways, Victor’s better half—kind and caring, full of enthusiasm and optimism—and now that he is dead, Victor is left alone with the faults he told Walton only a true friend could correct. It is also worth noting that, while Justine was executed for William’s murder although entirely innocent, Victor is allowed to go free after being accused of Clerval’s murder, for which he can be seen as bearing at least some responsibility.

Although he eventually recovers from the delirium into which he sinks after Clerval’s death, Victor’s mental health continues to suffer, as indicated by his apathy toward his release from prison, his suicidal urges, his continual fever, and his dependence on laudanum (a tincture of opium that, though highly addictive, was
widely used for medicinal purposes during the nineteenth century); he calls himself a “shattered wreck.” The illness Victor suffers in jail echoes the one he endured in Ingolstadt after abandoning the creature, which strongly suggests that Victor’s bouts of illness are psychosomatic, or caused by overwhelming psychological anguish. Only the “one duty” Victor still believes he has—to protect his family from the creature—motivates him to continue living, much as it did after the deaths of William and Justine. His description of the creature as the “monstrous Image which I had endued with the mockery of a soul still more monstrous” indicates that, even after listening to the creature’s story and breaking the promise he made to him, Victor believes his creation to be wholly evil. His use of the word “Image” also echoes the idea from the Book of Genesis that “God created man in His own image,” continuing the comparison of Victor to God and the creature to both Adam and Satan. Victor does take some responsibility for his actions when he laments that Clerval “had fallen a victim to me and the monster of my creation,” but he is too overwhelmed by emotion to think about the night he abandoned the creature, which may indicate that, on some level, Victor realizes it was this irresponsible rejection of his creation that led him to his current state. Nevertheless, he chooses to distract himself from reality again with the sense of security and “calm forgetfulness” he experiences after awakening from a nightmare about the creature. Victor’s nightmare is far from over, however, as he indicates to Walton and the reader by commenting that he felt “a truce was established between the present hour and the irresistible, disastrous future.”

Chapter Summaries: Volume 3: Chapters 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

After reaching the coast of France, Victor and his father head to Paris, where they stop so that Victor can rest. Alphonse urges his son to mingle with society, but Victor, wracked with guilt over his creation’s crimes, no longer feels worthy of interacting with other human beings. Though he continues to accuse himself of the murders of William, Justine, and Clerval, he refuses to explain these self-recriminations to his father. When Alphonse eventually begs him never to say such things again, Victor passionately replies that he is not mad, that he truly is responsible for the deaths of his loved ones, and that although he would have sacrificed his life to save them, he could not sacrifice the lives of all of humankind. This outburst convinces Alphonse that Victor is indeed suffering from some form of madness. After a while, however, Victor regains his outward calm and forces himself to stop talking about his crimes.

A few days before he and Alphonse leave Paris, Victor receives a letter from Elizabeth, who asks him if his misery stems from feeling honor-bound to marry her while being in love with someone else. Elizabeth acknowledges that, though Alphonse and Caroline always hoped Victor and Elizabeth would marry, Victor might think of her as a sister rather than a romantic partner. She begs him to be honest with her if this is the case, as above all she wants him to be happy. The letter reminds Victor that he expects to be murdered by the creature on his wedding night. As he believes he can find freedom from his guilt only in death, this idea doesn’t particularly upset him, except when he reflects that he will never be able to enjoy a future with Elizabeth. Wanting to make his father and Elizabeth even temporarily happy, and fearful that the creature might commit further murders should he attempt to postpone his marriage, Victor resolves to fulfill his promise to marry Elizabeth immediately upon his return to Switzerland. He writes a letter assuring Elizabeth that he loves her and promising to tell her his terrible secret the day after their wedding.

Victor and Alphonse arrive in Geneva a week later. When Elizabeth greets them she is upset by Victor’s emaciated, feverish appearance, and Victor notices that Elizabeth herself has grown thin and lost her former liveliness. Victor continues to be tormented by his memories, and his moods alternate between rage and a depression so deep he is unable to move or speak. Only Elizabeth can draw him out of these states, after which she urges him to resign himself to reality and make the best of things. Unfortunately, Victor’s secret guilt prevents him from following her advice. A date is fixed for the wedding, and Victor attempts to conceal his growing anxiety beneath a cheerful facade that fools his father but not his fiancée, who looks forward to
their marriage with some trepidation of her own. Alphonse arranges for Elizabeth to have part of her inheritance restored in the form of a cottage on Lake Como, where she and Victor will honeymoon after spending a night at an inn in Evian. Meanwhile, Victor remains armed at all times and keeps a constant lookout for the creature, but as the marriage draws nearer, the happiness he hopes to find with Elizabeth beings to overshadow the creature’s threat. On their wedding day, however, Elizabeth seems melancholy. As they sail across the lake to Evian after the wedding, Victor asks his wife to be happy, at least for this one day. Elizabeth promises to try to ignore her sense of foreboding. She turns her and Victor’s attention to the beautiful scenery, but Victor notices that she still seems distracted.

Victor and Elizabeth spend that evening walking along the lakeshore, then enjoying the view from the inn. As soon as night falls and a storm breaks out, Victor feels his fears revive. Elizabeth notices his agitation. Hoping to spare her the sight of the combat he expects to engage in with the creature, Victor asks her to wait for him in a separate room while he keeps watch. Just as he is beginning to think the creature won’t appear after all, he hears Elizabeth scream. Victor bursts into the room to find his wife lying dead on the bed. He faints, and when he regains consciousness he finds himself surrounded by the terrified guests and staff of the inn. He immediately rushes over to Elizabeth’s body, where he finds the telltale marks of strangulation on her neck. As he embraces his wife’s corpse in despair, he is horrified to see the creature standing at the window in the moonlight, grinning and pointing at Elizabeth’s body. Victor fires his pistol but misses, and the creature runs into the lake. He and the other guests and staff of the inn spend several hours unsuccessfully attempting to track down the creature by boat. When Victor tries to help a search party scour the countryside on foot, he collapses from exhaustion and is carried to bed. After a while he returns to the room where Elizabeth’s body has been laid out, where he realizes he needs to return to Geneva to protect his remaining family members.

Victor finds his father and brother safe at home, but the news of Elizabeth’s death proves too much for Alphonse, who dies a few days later. Victor suffers a breakdown and spends the next several months in a solitary cell in an asylum, where he gradually recovers and resolves to seek revenge on his creation. A month after his release he tells his story to a local magistrate and demands that the creature be made to answer for his crimes. The magistrate does not appear to believe the story but, intimidated by Victor’s rage and apparent madness, promises to try to bring the creature to justice. He warns Victor, however, that this will probably prove impossible given the creature’s superhuman powers and unknown whereabouts. Sensing that the magistrate is not taking him seriously, Victor flies into a rage and vows to destroy the creature himself before storming out of the house.

Analysis

Elizabeth’s murder forms the climax of the novel and deals Victor the fatal blow that destroys any chance he had at finding happiness. Throughout the novel, Elizabeth has been portrayed as “saintly,” pure, infinitely kind, caring, compassionate, and good—an embodiment of all the feminine ideals of the era and of the archetype of the passive, virtuous woman. She has shown Victor nothing but love and acceptance—something Victor never showed to his creation—and a peaceful future with her has constituted the sum of Victor’s hopes. Now, through the creature, Victor finds himself responsible for the death of the woman he loved, idolized, and once thought of his own “cherished possession.” In murdering Elizabeth, the creature has achieved revenge for the destruction of his own intended companion as well as destroyed the living embodiment of the feminine affection and kindness he has longed to receive, thereby symbolically destroying all that remained of his desire for love and admiration of goodness. Just as the creature became entirely focused on hatred and revenge after Victor destroyed his unfinished mate, revenging himself on his hated creation becomes the sole purpose of Victor’s life when he recovers from the breakdown he suffers after the deaths of Elizabeth and Alphonse. (Incidentally, Shelley never reveals what becomes of Victor’s only surviving family member, Ernest Frankenstein.) Now almost as isolated from society as the creature, Victor seeks help by bringing his story to a local magistrate. His decision to finally share his secret, however, is rendered futile by the fact that the
creature has already completely destroyed his life—and by the fact that, just as he feared after William’s murder, his incredible story is viewed as madness. Everyone who might have believed Victor’s tale is dead, at least in part because he kept his secret to himself and chose to remain passive. It appears to be too late for either Victor or the creature to find peace or redemption now.

Chapter Summaries: Volume 3: Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

With no hope left of anything but revenge, Victor decides to leave Geneva and track down the creature but is uncertain of how to begin his pursuit. The day of his departure he wanders around town until nightfall, when he enters the cemetery and kneels before his family tomb. There he prays for help from the spirits of his loved ones and swears aloud that, although he no longer wants to live, he will spend the rest of his life pursuing the creature until either he or his creation is dead. Unseen in the darkness, the creature laughs and tells Victor he is satisfied with his creator’s decision before disappearing into the dark.

Led by slight clues and chance sightings, Victor follows the creature’s trail down the Rhone River, across the Black Sea, and into the Russian wilderness. Sometimes the people in the villages he passes through point him in the direction of the creature, and other times the creature himself leaves Victor clues. Victor also finds himself miraculously saved from danger and provided with food in his most desperate moments, which he attributes to the actions of the guiding spirits of his loved ones. At night he experiences blissful dreams of being with his father, Elizabeth, and Clerval in Switzerland. These dreams give him the strength to continue mechanically pursuing the creature during the day. The creature leaves notes commanding Victor to follow him into the Arctic wastes, pointing him toward food, and reminding him of the cold and suffering he will be made to endure until their final confrontation. After finding a note with instructions to prepare himself for the final leg of the journey, Victor acquires a sledge and dogs. He travels swiftly, gaining on the creature all the time, and soon arrives in a village on the coast. The villagers tell Victor the creature arrived last night and stole a sledge and dogs of his own before setting out across the sea of ice. At this news Victor almost loses hope, but he is driven onward by his burning desire for revenge and his belief that the spirits are encouraging him in his task. He exchanges his sledge for one suited to traveling across the ice and continues his pursuit.

After three weeks on the frozen sea, Victor has almost given in to despair. After one of his dogs dies following an exhausting trek up a mountain of ice, he looks out across the ocean and sees the creature in the distance. The sight of his nemesis causes Victor to weep with joy and renewed hope. He pursues the creature for two days but loses track of him when the ice breaks, leaving Victor stranded on a perpetually shrinking ice sheet. Several hours later he is amazed to see Walton’s ship, which he steers himself toward with oars made from his shattered sledge. He plans to ask for a boat in which to continue the chase but consents to come onboard when he learns the ship is heading north.

Now, having finished his tale, Victor wonders if he will live to fulfill his vengeance. Though he doesn’t expect Walton to seek the creature himself, he does ask the captain to kill the creature if he should ever come in contact with him. Walton’s record of Victor’s story ends here, and the captain continues his own narrative in further letters to his sister.

Letter of August 26th, 17–

Walton describes how Victor alternated between calm, agony, and rage as he spent a week telling his horrific story. Having read Felix and Safie’s letters and seen the creature himself from the ship, Walton is entirely convinced of the truth of Victor’s tale. Several times he has asked for details of the creature’s formation, but Victor is unwilling to see his mistakes repeated and refuses to elaborate. The two men often converse on other
subjects, and Walton praises Victor’s eloquence and intelligence while lamenting the fact that he will lose the only true friend he has ever found if Victor dies. He tries to convince Victor to start a new life and form new relationships, but Victor replies that no one will ever be able to replace Elizabeth or Clerval. His life’s sole purpose now is to destroy the creature. Walton observes that Victor’s only happiness lies in dreaming of his dead loved ones, who he believes visit him in spirit, and he reluctantly acknowledges that the only peace his guest can hope to find lies in death.

Letter of September 2nd

Walton’s ship is trapped between mountains of ice. He worries he and his crew will all perish before the ice breaks and that his “mad schemes” will be to blame. The thought of his sister waiting in vain for his return to England particularly pains the captain, but he hopes she will live a happy life with her family even if he dies at sea. Victor encourages Walton not to lose hope, reminding him that sailors have survived similar situations many times before, and Walton feels his spirits lifted by his friend’s eloquence. The sailors also take temporary courage from Victor’s words, but with each passing day they become more anxious to escape the ice. Walton begins to fear a mutiny.

Letter of September 5th

The ship is still trapped in ice and in danger of being crushed. Several of the sailors have died, and Victor’s health is failing. In the morning a group of sailors demand to be let into Walton’s cabin, where on behalf of the whole crew they ask that if a passage through the ice opens, the captain will turn the ship southward rather than subject them to further peril. Walton is troubled by the idea of turning back but feels that he might not have the right to refuse the sailors’ request. While Walton hesitates to reply, Victor rouses himself from his sickbed to make an impassioned speech in which he exhorts the sailors to be brave and cling to their “glorious” purpose rather than abandon it at the first sign of danger. If they turn around now, he says, they will return home as cowards, but if they continue their quest they will be hailed as heroes. Exhausted by this speech, Victor sinks back into near-lifelessness. Walton tells the sailors to think about his friend’s words. If they insist on turning around, he will consent, but he hopes the crew will regain their courage. Personally, however, Walton would prefer to die at sea rather than face the shame of abandoning his goal.

Letter of September 7th

Walton agrees to abandon the voyage and turn southward if the ship is freed. His hopes of scientific discovery destroyed, he laments the fact that he will have to return home “ignorant and disappointed.”

Letter of September 12th

The ice breaks, opening a passage south, and to the joy of the crew, Walton gives the order to turn the ship toward England. Victor reacts to the news by telling Walton that, for his part, he will not give up his quest. Certain that the spirits he believes are guiding him will give him strength, he tries to leap out of bed but immediately faints. When he regains consciousness, the ship’s doctor privately tells Walton that Victor doesn’t have long to live. Later, as Walton sits by his friend’s bedside, Victor tells him that he no longer feels any hatred or vengefulness toward the creature, although he still believes his creation should be destroyed. He also believes he did the right thing by refusing to make the creature a companion who might have shared the creature’s propensity for vengeance and violence. Aware that he is close to death, Victor renews his request that Walton finish his task for him by destroying the creature, assuring the captain that what he first asked out of a desire for revenge he now asks out of “reason and virtue.” Despite his fear that the creature might live to wreak further havoc, Victor says he feels happy for the first time in years and sees his dead loved ones waiting for him. He advises Walton to choose peace over ambition but acknowledges that others might succeed in
their ambitions where he himself has failed. Half an hour later, Victor dies. Walton mourns the loss of his friend and the failure of his expedition but hopes he will find solace at home.

That night, Walton hears a hoarse voice coming from the room where Victor’s body lies. He enters to find the creature standing over Victor’s coffin. The captain is horrified by the creature’s hideous face, but when the creature darts toward the window, Walton asks him to stay. The creature pauses. Turning back to Victor’s body, he declares that his life is complete now that he has destroyed his creator, and he laments that he can no longer beg Victor’s forgiveness. Though Walton had intended to destroy the creature as Victor asked, he finds himself moved to compassion by the creature’s words. When the creature continues to reproach himself, however, Walton points out that his remorse is useless now and that if he had heeded it sooner, Victor would still be alive. The creature replies that he has been tormented by remorse ever since he began to wreak his vengeance. After murdering Clerval he was overcome by self-loathing and pity for his creator, but when he saw that Victor was preparing to marry, the creature was overcome by envy. He felt compelled to fulfill his earlier promise to seek revenge on Victor’s wedding night even though he believed killing Elizabeth would bring him agony. After her murder, however, the creature began to exult in evil and despair, becoming wholly focused on completing his revenge. Now that Victor is dead, the creature has finally accomplished his goal.

Walton is moved by this speech until he remembers that Victor warned him of the creature’s powers of persuasion. He accuses the creature of mourning Victor’s death only because the “hypocritical fiend” can now no longer torment his creator. The creature denies this but says he doesn’t expect sympathy. His dreams of being loved, accepted, and virtuous have all been destroyed, and he considers himself the most miserable and malignant being on earth. He points out that Victor’s story couldn’t have captured the misery the creature endured and questions why he should be treated like a criminal when those who have rejected and harmed him are regarded as blameless. Nevertheless, the creature acknowledges that he has committed terrible crimes, for which he hates himself. He tells Walton he plans to travel as far north as possible, where he will build himself a funeral pyre and gladly die in the flames. For all the suffering Victor endured, the creature believes he has endured worse. Only in death can he hope to be relieved of his misery and guilt. After bidding the captain farewell, Victor Frankenstein’s creature leaps out the cabin window and disappears into the darkness on a sheet of ice.

Analysis

Without the joy and meaning he once found in family, friendship, science, and the divine majesty of nature, hunting down the creature he abandoned becomes the sole purpose of Victor’s life. He describes his pursuit of the creature as “more as a task enjoined by heaven, as the mechanical impulse of some power of which I was unconscious, than as the ardent desire of my soul.” Likewise, the creature’s sole purpose is now to make his creator suffer as long as possible by leading him into the Arctic wastes: “you live, and my power is complete,” he writes in one of his notes to Victor. Creature and creator are locked in a struggle that constitutes the only purpose or meaning left to either of them and that can end only in death. For Walton, the Arctic is—or, at least, was at the start of his voyage—a land of mystery, wonder, and poetry, but in Victor’s case the Arctic reflects the barrenness and isolation of his ruined life. More bleak even than the island where he assembled and destroyed the creature’s companion, the harsh lifelessness of the sea of ice contrasts with the lush, gentle beauty of Switzerland, where he grew up surrounded by love and happiness.

In Walton’s final letters, his admiration for Victor appears untarnished by the tale he has just heard—a tale which is sometimes interpreted as portraying Victor as being as or more monstrous than the creature. On his deathbed, Victor himself comes to the questionable conclusion that he bears no blame for his past actions. He does, however, lament that, while he once believed he was destined for greatness, he has now sunk into “degradation.” Just as the creature has done several times, Victor compares himself to Satan: “All my speculations and hopes are as nothing; and, like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained in an
eternal hell.” The creature has achieved his revenge in forcing Victor to suffer the same internal suffering he has himself endured, except that Victor at least has the memories of his loved ones and the belief that he will see them in the afterlife to comfort him. Later, after being encountered by Walton following Victor’s death, the creature echoes Victor’s words when he compares himself to Satan for the last time: “But it is even so; the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil. Yet even that enemy of God and man had friends and associates in his desolation; I am alone.”

Victor’s advice to Walton is somewhat contradictory in these final letters. Although his entire life story would seem to warn against the selfish, single-minded pursuit of scientific ambition, he delivers an impassioned speech to Walton and the sailors in which he urges them not to give up their “glorious expedition” but to continue north and become “benefactors of your species”—exactly what Victor dreamed of being when he decided to form the creature. “This ice,” he tells them, “is not made of such stuff as your hearts may be; it is mutable, and cannot withstand you, if you say that it shall not.” Victor appears to retain his belief that humans can—and should—conquer and control the forces of nature in the name of knowledge. Just before he dies, though, he advises Walton to “Seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries,” adding that, then again, it is possible that others might succeed where he has failed. The fact that Walton agrees to turn the ship around and return home can be taken as evidence that the captain has learned, if reluctantly, from Victor’s experiences, just as Victor hoped he might when he first began to tell his story.

Walton later finds the creature standing over Victor’s dead body with his hand extended. The creature’s posture echoes the way in which, on the night he was brought to life, he stood over Victor while he slept, then extended one hand as if to “detain” his creator as Victor fled. In Walton’s conversation with the creature, the reader receives the creature’s point of view (through the medium of Walton’s letter) one last time. In contrast to Victor, who decided on his deathbed that his past actions were not “blameable,” and who didn’t feel he had done wrong by the “daemon” he had created, the creature is consumed by remorse and self-loathing because of his actions and wishes he could ask Victor to forgive him.

Like Victor when he encountered the creature on Montanvert, Walton is appalled by the creature’s appearance, and he struggles with mixed emotions of compassion and anger as the creature speaks. Interestingly, Walton loses sympathy for the creature when he recalls that Victor warned him about the creature’s eloquence—a trait Walton previously ascribed to Victor himself and ardently praised. Victor died believing himself basically blameless and the creature a malevolent being that should be destroyed, while the creature—although he still believes he has been treated unjustly by hypocritical humankind—goes to his death believing himself a “malignant devil” and Victor “the select specimen of all that is worthy of love and admiration among men.” At the same time, he believes his overwhelming sense of remorse has made his anguish far worse than Victor’s ever was. In the end, both creature and creator die as beings broken by suffering, and both welcome death as an end to their pain.

Themes: Popular Themes

Victor Frankenstein is a brilliant, rational, and self-centered man who comes to understand the importance of friendship, family, and love. His monster is brutal and destructive but also rational and eloquent and longs for affection and companionship. Although these two at times seem antithetical, their characters also complement one another.

Frankenstein's creation of the monster is a supreme rational and imaginative effort, as he himself explains: "My imagination was vivid, yet my powers of analysis and application were intense; by the union of these qualities I conceived the idea and executed the creation of a man." After the monster's creation, the union between Frankenstein's imagination and intellect disintegrates. Like Hamlet, he is plagued by doubt and
inaction: he decides to destroy the monster yet pities him; he decides to make a female monster but destroys her; he knows the monster is plotting revenge, but mistakenly assumes he is the target.

The monster, too, is a strange combination of unbalanced intellect and emotion. As the product of Frankenstein's reason, he represents reason in isolation. Yet, he tells Walton, "my heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy." When first the De Laceys reject him in horror and then Frankenstein refuses him any kind of companionship, the monster's tender emotions turn to poisoned selfishness and envy. Even revenge brings him only frustration and misery, "wasting in impotent passions." While the monster destroys Frankenstein's hopes, he does not satisfy his own desires.

Besides the unresolvable clash between intellect and emotions, analysis and imagination, Shelley's *Frankenstein* bears other traces of Romantic thought, although questioned rather than wholly accepted. Nature with its variety for the Romantics provided a source of wonder and a source of healing for man. In his deepest distress Frankenstein seeks to draw vitality from his surroundings. His fiancee Elizabeth encourages him, "Observe . . . how the clouds . . . render this scene of beauty still more interesting. Look also at the innumerable fish that are swimming in the clear waters . . . What a divine day! How happy and serene all nature appears!" Yet nature's joys are impermanent. Just when the mountains cause Frankenstein's heart to swell with joy, the monster appears; just after Elizabeth has enjoyed the clouds and clear water, the fiend murders her. Nature is at best apathetic to man: It destroys as well as preserves, creates lightning as well as sunshine.

**Additional Themes: Themes**

**Alienation and Loneliness**
Mary Shelley's emphasis on the Faust legend, or the quest to conquer the unknown at the cost of one's humanity, forms a central theme of the novel. The reader continually sees Victor favor his ambition above his friendships and family. Created by a German writer named Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the Faust myth suggested that the superior individual could throw off the shackles of traditional conventions and alienate himself from society. English Romantic poets, who assumed the status of poet-prophets, believed that only in solitude could they produce great poetry. In *Frankenstein*, however, isolation only leads to despair. Readers get the distinct feeling that Victor's inquisitive nature causes his emotional and physical peril because he cannot balance his intellectual and social interactions. For instance, when he leaves home to attend the University of Ingolstadt, he immerses himself in his experiment and forgets about the family who lovingly supported him throughout his childhood. Victor actually does not see his family or correspond with them for six years, even when his father and Elizabeth try to keep in touch with him by letters. Shelley's lengthy description of Victor's model parents contrasts with his obsessive drive to create the creature.

Margaret's correspondence with Walton at the beginning of the novel also compares with Shelley's description of Victor's home life; both men were surrounded by caring, nurturing individuals who considered the welfare of their loved ones at all times. Not surprisingly, Walton's ambition to conquer the unknown moves him, like it does Victor, further away from civilization and closer to feelings of isolation and depression. The creature, too, begins reading novels such as Goethe's *The Sorrows of Werter* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, claiming that an "increase of knowledge only [showed] what a wretched outcast I was." For the creature, an increase in knowledge only brings sorrow and discontent. Victor and Walton ultimately arrive at these two states because of their inquisitive natures.

**Nature vs. Nurture**
The theme of nurturing, or how environment contributes to a person's character, truly fills the novel. With every turn of the page, another nurturing example contrasts with Victor's lack of a parental role with his "child," the creature. Caroline nurtures Elizabeth back to health and loses her own life as a result. Clerval
nurtures Victor through his illness when he is in desperate need of a caretaker after the creature is brought to life. The De Lacey's nurturing home becomes a model for the creature, as he begins to return their love in ways the family cannot even comprehend. For instance, the creature stopped stealing the De Lacey's food after realizing their poverty. In sympathy, he left firewood for the family to reduce Felix's chores. Each nurturing act contrasts strongly with Victor's gross neglect of the creature's needs. And by showing the affection between Caroline Frankenstein and her adopted daughters Elizabeth and Justine, Shelley suggests that a child need not have biological ties to a parent to deserve an abundance of love and attention.

**Appearances and Reality**

Victor's inquisitive probing causes him to delve beneath the appearances of "acceptable" science and create an animate being from inanimate materials. Nevertheless, he forgets to extend this inquiring sensibility toward his creature. The creature's physical appearance prompts Victor to flee from his creation; Victor never takes the time to search beneath the creature's ugliness to discover the very human qualities that the creature possesses. While Victor easily manipulates nature and natural laws to suit his own intellectual interests, he lacks an understanding of human nature, as proven throughout the novel.

In addition to the importance of the creature's appearance, Shelley emphasizes the magnificent landscape throughout the novel. This demonstrates her loyalty to the Romantic movement of her time, which often glorified nature. Although Victor often turns to nature to relieve his despondent thoughts, Clerval notices the intimate interaction between nature and humans in Switzerland. He says to Victor, "Look at that . . . group of labourers coming from among their vines; and that village half-hid in the recess of the mountain." Clerval looks beyond nature's surface appearance, drawing Victor's attention to the harmonious interaction between nature and a productive society. Victor praises his friend as having a "wild and enthusiastic imagination [which] was chastened by the sensibility of his heart," a sensibility Victor ironically lacks. In the isolated Arctic, when Walton's ship is trapped by mountains of ice, he respects nature's resistance to his exploration and eventually leaves the untamed region. Like Clerval, Walton experiences life by interacting harmoniously with nature and people, as he proves when he honors his crew members' request to return home.

**Duty and Responsibility**

Victor's inability to know his creature relates directly to his lack of responsibility for the creature's welfare or the creature's actions. The role of responsibility or duty takes many shapes throughout the story, but familial obligations represent one of the novel's central themes. Whether Caroline nurses Elizabeth or Felix blames himself for his family's impoverished condition, Victor's dismissal of his parental duties makes readers empathize with the creature. Victor only feels a sense of duty after the creature says the famous line, "How dare you sport thus with life. Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind." The creature compares himself to Adam—thus comparing Victor to God—and claims that Victor owes him a certain amount of happiness. Even though the creature temporarily convinces Victor to grant him his rights, Victor never really learns the virtues of parental or ethical responsibility.

**Justice vs. Injustice**

By showing how Victor ignores his responsibilities while those around him do not, Shelley invites the reader to judge his character. Themes of justice and injustice play a large role in the novel, as the author develops issues of fairness and blame. Usually those characters who take responsibility for others and for their own actions are considered fair and just. For example, Elizabeth pleads Justine's case in court after Justine is accused of William's murder. Victor knows the creature committed the crime, yet he does not—or cannot—reveal the creature's wrongdoing.

However, the most important aspect of the trial is Justine's confession. Elizabeth claims, "I believed you guiltless . . . until I heard that you had yourself declared your guilt." When Justine explains that she confessed after being found guilty because that was the only way to receive absolution from the church, Elizabeth accepts her at her word and tells her, "I will proclaim, I will prove your innocence." Making confessions,
listening to others, and offering verbal promises all signal the highest truths in this novel. Elizabeth accepts Justine's guilt only if Justine says she is guilty; never mind the facts or evidence, never mind intuition—words reveal true belief. Except for Victor, every character listens to others: Mr. Kirwin listens to Victor's story, the creature listens to the De Lacey family, Felix listens to Safie's father, Margaret listens to Walton, and Walton listens to Victor and to his crew. Listening helps all of these characters distinguish fair from unfair. Victor's refusal to listen impartially to his creature says much about his character. Shelley suggests that Victor not only played God when he created the creature; he also unfairly played the role of judge and accuser.

Forbidden Knowledge
One thing that connects Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton, perhaps the most important thing, is the fact that they seek to gain knowledge of the forbidden, whether it is a science that is closer to witchcraft or a region covered with impassable ice. In Mary Shelley’s time science was just beginning to make powerful strides alongside the beginnings of industrialization; she feared that these strides were somehow inhuman, that there were things Man was not meant to know. She created the tandem characters to show the two paths the pursuit of forbidden knowledge creates.

Victor’s pursuit of a way to create life in the end only destroys lives, including his and the monster’s; nevertheless, he continues his pursuit. He even metaphorically pursues the monster, the result of his experiments, to end the destruction he himself created. Victor has no one but himself to blame, Shelley might be telling us, because he violated the boundaries of what Man needs to know. Once violated, those boundaries fall behind, leaving disaster in their wake.

Walton takes the path Victor refuses. Through Victor’s example, Walton surveys the sheets of ice surrounding his ship and backs out of his dangerous quest for the North Pole. He wants to be the explorer, but not to the degree that Victor is, with nothing but heartache to show for his efforts. This wisdom can only come through his encounter with Victor. Mary Shelley uses Walton as a frame narrator because only through his eyes can we see that Victor is really the monster, and that he allows himself to be because he stretches human knowledge further than it was meant to go.

Science vs. Nature
The Romantic period produced many naturalist writers who praised the beauty and the perfect system of nature over man-made substitutes. Mary Shelley’s husband Percy and his colleague Lord Byron were such poets, and Mary found herself agreeing with them. As science began to make a foothold in their time, some writers ignored it while others railed against the change. What better way to protest the encroachment of science than to tell the story of a man whose science lurches out of control, producing two literal monsters?

Victor Frankenstein is symbolic of this “science gone mad,” and he represents the new establishment that preferred test tubes to sonnets. The monster represents the results of this science – more amoral than immoral, not necessarily bad but dangerous to all around it. The monster roams through lakes and forests and grasslands to bring the contrast between science and nature into full focus – try as he might, the monster doesn’t fit into these natural settings.

Mary Shelley’s disdain for the “New Science” prompts us to think about similar issues in our own lives – is science for its own sake “good science,” or is it “bad” if it disturbs a natural balance? What exactly is a natural balance, and what constitutes “science”? The novel raised these questions during the Romantic period, and we are still trying to answer them today.

Language
Frankenstein itself is a “novel within a novel”; within this “inner novel” we see many other types of language - letters, notes, journals, inscriptions, and books whether physically present or alluded to, appear time and time again. Each document is an attempt to preserve a particular kind of language.
Walton’s language is that of the sea – bold, strong words that resist the flowery style of a great deal of prose of the period. His letters to his sister are relatively simple and straightforward, telling of his time on the sea and his time spent with Victor; it is almost as if he is speaking to her directly rather than writing.

Victor’s language, on the other hand, is expressed in his journals – mathematical formulas, charts and graphs, sketches of machines and fragments of sentences. His prose in his journals is more flowery than that of Walton’s letters, but Mary Shelley’s depiction of him as a madman scribbling scientific text is undeniable. We have a hard time feeling anything for Victor as he writes down the results of his experiments.

The monster has no language, and he must learn one for himself. He learns some from Victor, some from the townspeople who briefly befriend him, and some seems to come from within. At the end of the novel the monster uses his language to punish Victor, leaving messages cut into trees and rocks to taunt him. It is a language of anger and of grief, as incomplete as Walton’s is clear and Victor’s is superior. In the end the only language that survives to speak another day is Walton’s, again underscoring the idea that the simplest view of the world is often the best.

Multiple Personalities
It’s ironic that Mary Shelley’s husband Percy coined the term “Imitative Fallacy,” because Frankenstein could certainly be (and has been) accused of it. The novel itself has “multiple personalities,” and so does Victor Frankenstein. The differences between the “personalities” provide the novel’s greatest source of tension, dramatic and heightened for the sake of suspense.

Victor Frankenstein’s creation has often been characterized as his “dark side,” similar to Robert Louis Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, written almost 70 years later. The Frankenstein monster could be considered a model for Stevenson’s Mr. Hyde, the embodiment of all of Henry Jekyll’s less “proper” thoughts and actions. The monster is an untamed version of Victor’s ego, demanding and determined yet brutish and naïve. He expects things to go his way, and when they don’t, he responds with violence. The monster could even be called a manifestation of Victor’s “inner child.”

Victor’s split is reflected in the novel’s structure, which shifts from letters to journals to straight narration to what seems like intense first-person accounts. Victor is the narrator of record, but his observations are far too omniscient to be realistically his throughout the novel. Mary Shelley’s narrator actually shifts from perspective to perspective, using the best perspective and the best form (see “Language” above) to tell a particular part of the story.

Percy Shelley’s Imitative Fallacy warns against making a work of literature reflect its characters; Frankenstein looks this idea right in the eye and works, both reflecting the feelings of Victor and the other characters and providing a narrative that rises above their individual perceptions.

Characters

Victor Frankenstein

Victor Frankenstein is introduced as a tortured man on his deathbed, bent on destroying the creature he arrogantly brought into existence. However, in his youth, he was a bright and curious boy full of boundless optimism who hoped to leave a lasting impression on humanity. Born in Geneva, Switzerland, to doting
parents, Victor leads a happy childhood. As a child, he was fascinated by the writings of ancient alchemists, which spurred his interest in studying immortality. After he enters the University of Ingolstadt, he learns to combine his love for mysticism with more modern methodologies. (Read our extended character analysis of Victor Frankenstein.)

The Creature

The creature is the product of Victor Frankenstein’s labors, a shockingly ugly, eight-foot-tall being assembled and animated from dead tissue. Victor designs him to be beautiful, a higher version of the human form. However, after seeing the creature’s ghastly visage for the first time, Victor flees in disgust, and the creature is left alone in the world. However, despite the creature’s repulsive appearance, Victor has apparently succeeded in creating a superior being; the creature is faster, stronger, and more resilient than the average human, and he shows himself to be articulate, rational, and capable of deep emotional reflection. (Read our extended character analysis of Frankenstein's Creature.)

Robert Walton

Robert Walton is the narrator of the novel’s frame story and his letters to his sister Margaret convey Victor’s story to readers. His ship rescues Victor during an expedition in the arctic and Victor and Walton become friends. Victor tells Walton his life story and cautions the younger man against pursuing forbidden knowledge. At the start of the novel, Walton is a young, self-educated man who hopes to uncover new knowledge and make an impact on the world by exploring the arctic. However, after his encounter with Victor, he reluctantly turns back towards England at the behest of his crew, unfulfilled but ultimately wiser. (Read our extended character analysis of Robert Walton.)

Minor Characters

In addition to the main characters above, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein includes many minor characters—such as Henry Clerval, Elizabeth Lavenza, and Justine Moritz. For more information about these characters and others, read more about them on their own page.

Characters: Victor Frankenstein

Extended Character Analysis

Victor Frankenstein is introduced as a tortured man on his deathbed, bent on destroying the creature he arrogantly brought into existence. However, in his youth, he was a bright and curious boy full of boundless optimism who hoped to leave a lasting impression on humanity. Born in Geneva, Switzerland, to doting parents, Victor leads a happy childhood. As a child, he was fascinated by the writings of ancient alchemists, which spurred his interest in studying immortality. After he enters the University of Ingolstadt, he learns to combine his love for mysticism with more modern methodologies.

Victor’s chief scientific pursuit is to answer fundamental questions about life and death. Specifically, he hopes to overcome death and create a new species of superhumans, who he believes will “bless” him as their “creator and source.” Victor’s motivations for creating the creature are complex, and, as he narrates his life to Walton, he seems torn between blaming fate for his misfortunes and accepting responsibility for his actions.

Victor’s initial fascination with overcoming death can be traced back to his childhood obsession with alchemy. Though eventually won over by modern scientific concepts, like chemistry, Victor never loses his interest in mysticism. The derision he faces as a result only seems to spur him forward, leading him to
combine modern methods with ancient philosophies. The death of his mother also greatly impacts Victor. He comes to view humans as deficient and artless in their mortality, and he aspires to better humanity through his scientific work.

However, Victor’s vision of himself as the “creator and source” of a new, better species suggests that his motivation is rooted in arrogance rather than altruism. Victor does want to advance humanity, but he hopes that by doing so, he will be the recipient of the love and gratitude due to a god. Just as the Greek Titan Prometheus sculpted humans out of clay, Victor sculpts what he hopes will be the first member of his superior race out of dead tissue. Just as Prometheus gave fire to humanity, a gift they were not meant to receive, Victor attempts to give the secret of immortality to humanity. Yet while Prometheus loved and nurtured his creations, going so far as to steal fire from the Greek gods for them, Victor is disgusted by his creation, fleeing from the creature’s hideous countenance.

By rejecting the creature, Victor fails as a creator. Whereas Prometheus was punished for defying the Greek gods out of his love for humanity, Victor is punished for refusing to take responsibility for his creation. Whereas Prometheus was loved by his creations, Victor is reviled. Though Victor aspires to godhood, he proves inadequate. In rejecting instead of loving his creation, Victor inadvertently condemns his creature to a life of suffering and loneliness. As the creature exacts his revenge, Victor is punished for his transgressions against the natural order and against his hapless creation. By a twist of fate, Victor’s endeavor to reanimate dead tissue is successful, but his rejection of the creature results in misery instead of glory.

The overarching theme of Victor’s story is that knowledge comes at a price. In Victor’s case, that price is his relationships with his friends and family, his sanity, and, ultimately, his life. Though surrounded by loving friends and family members, Victor isolates himself in his pursuit of forbidden knowledge. The more he learns about the secrets of life and death, the more he withdraws from his mentors and loved ones. In the months leading up to his successful creation of the creature, Victor begins shunning his “fellow-creatures as if [he] had been guilty of a crime.”

As Victor tells his story to Walton, he seems to believe that fate was aligned against him from the beginning and that it was his destiny to pursue his unnatural goals. He comes to view his creation as a monster, which “heaven” and “destiny” have called upon him to destroy. However, the narrative seems to suggest that neither fate nor the creature are the true villains of Victor’s story. Unlike the creature, who faced rejection from all he met, Victor’s isolation is self-imposed. Perhaps fate led Victor to pursue the secrets of immortality, but it was Victor’s own arrogance and irresponsibility that unleashed the creature on the world, cementing his status as a tragic hero.

Ultimately, Victor has no one to blame for his downfall but himself. The creature can be read as an extension of Victor in that he embodies Victor’s self-destructive pursuit of forbidden knowledge. Not only is the creature a direct result of Victor’s pursuits, but he also dramatizes the self-destructive essence of Victor’s illicit research by preventing Victor from reintegrating into normal life. After the creature is brought to life and Victor sees the hideous results of his transgressions, Victor takes solace in the company of his family and friends, coming to appreciate the beauty of nature once again. However, the creature inevitably intrudes on Victor's attempts to return to his idyllic childhood by murdering his youngest brother and inadvertently causing the persecution and death of the family servant, Justine.

The tragedies that befall Victor after his creation of the “monster” symbolize the incompatibility of Victor’s newfound knowledge with the joys of companionship. On another level, the creature also comes to resemble Victor in his pursuit of knowledge. As he discovers his own capacity for destruction and his utter repugnance in the eyes of humanity, the creature descends into sin and evil, betraying his own conscience. He ultimately learns, much as Victor did, that guilt isolates him, even from himself.
During a trip to the glaciers of Mount Blanc, Victor is confronted by the creature, who requests that Victor create a female companion for him. The creature wishes to be released from his isolation, but Victor can only view his creation as a demon unworthy of compassion; he curses not only the creature but also himself, highlighting his inability to see past his own selfish actions.

By the end of the novel, Victor is miserable and isolated. As he tells his story to Walton, he cautions the young explorer against pursuing knowledge and claims that true happiness is best found in naivete. Though finally able to admit his own folly in attempting to defy nature and overcome death, he remains unwilling to acknowledge his role in the creature’s descent into evil. Victor never reconciles with the creature, nor does he express remorse for abandoning his creation. He dies unable to acknowledge the humanity of his creation nor the monstrousness within his own nature.

**Characters: The Creature**

**Extended Character Analysis**

The creature is the product of Victor Frankenstein’s labors, a shockingly ugly, eight-foot-tall being assembled and animated from dead tissue. Victor designs him to be beautiful, a higher version of the human form. However, after seeing the creature’s ghastly visage for the first time, Victor flees in disgust, and the creature is left alone in the world. However, despite the creature’s repulsive appearance, Victor has apparently succeeded in creating a superior being; the creature is faster, stronger, and more resilient than the average human, and he shows himself to be articulate, rational, and capable of deep emotional reflection.

After Victor abandons him, the creature flees into the woods and begins reverently observing the De Lacey family. He educates himself using one of Victor’s journals and a bag of abandoned books that he finds in the woods, which contains *Paradise Lost, Plutarch’s Lives*, and *The Sorrows of Werter*. These novels shape the creature’s understanding of the world and allow him to construct a sense of self. Guided by Milton, the creature compares himself to both Adam and Satan: created to be the first of a new species like Adam but rejected by God and living in wretched misery like Satan. Increasingly aware of his own loneliness as a result of his newfound literacy, the creature endeavors to befriend the De Laceys by approaching the blind patriarch. However, his intentions are misinterpreted by the rest of the family, and they attack him. Disillusioned, the creature endeavors to confront his creator and arrives in Geneva, Victor’s hometown.

During his journey, the creature attempts to save a young girl from drowning. However, an observer mistakenly assumes that he is attacking the girl and shoots him with a gun. The creature then vows vengeance against all of humanity, realizing with bitterness that his appearance will bar him from ever obtaining the love and acceptance he craves. This event marks the beginning of his murderous escapade, as he subsequently arrives in Geneva and murders Victor’s younger brother, William. Having given up finding companionship with humans, the creature petitions Victor to create a mate that is like him. However, when Victor reneges on their agreement, the creature seeks revenge and begins to systematically kill everyone Victor loves.

One of the central questions regarding the creature is whether he is an evil and unnatural villain destined to perpetuate destruction, an innocent victim of Victor’s experimentation and subsequent neglect, or a complex blend of both. From Victor’s perspective, the creature is a remorseless villain who is out to commit endless “mischief” against humanity. By this interpretation, the creature’s unnaturalness renders him inherently wicked. This reading is supported by the creature’s murders of Victor’s family and friends, as well as his torment of Victor. By the end of the novel, the creature has become an evil, villainous figure whose only purpose is to inflict the same misery on his creator that he himself has experienced.
However, despite his capacity for violence, the creature proves capable of deep, insightful thought and shows genuine remorse for his actions. Seen in terms of these qualities, the creature is more akin to an abandoned child than a heartless villain. Abandoned by his creator, attacked by the De Laceys, and falsely accused of murder after his attempted rescue of the little girl, the creature lives a life of rejection and isolation. His quest for love and affection proves fruitless, so he ultimately seeks out the only form of attention he can get from his creator by inspiring Victor’s hatred.

Yet another interpretation unites the creature’s villainy and victimhood. This reading posits that proof of the creature’s humanity lies in his ability to simultaneously be both victim and villain. Just as Victor is both a villain to the creature and a victim of its revenge, the creature is also a nuanced character. After Victor’s death, the creature laments to Walton that every villainous act he has committed weighs on his conscience. In requesting that Victor make a companion for him, the creature states, “I am malicious because I am miserable.”

Unlike Victor, who denies his own culpability in the creature’s misery until the end, the creature has no illusions regarding his own wickedness. He knows that his actions were unforgivable and does not seek to justify them, but he laments that the injustices of his life led him to perpetuate evil. His desire was never to do harm, but he cannot escape the fact that he allowed his bitterness to overwhelm him; this aligns him with the tragic hero archetype, a role both he and Victor fulfill in their separate ways.

An alternate reading positions the creature as less of an independent agent and more of an extension of Victor. By this interpretation, the creature represents Victor’s punishment for pursuing forbidden knowledge. The creature, then, is symbolized by the eagle sent to pluck out Prometheus’s liver day after day.

As he works on the creature, Victor isolates himself and grows sickly. After successfully reanimating the creature, Victor is horrified by the creature’s ghastly appearance and seeks to return to the innocent, loving embrace of his family and friends, rejecting science entirely. However, at every turn, the creature decides to follow Victor, and works to inhibit his happiness he murders the ones Victor loves when he does not give the creature compassion or companionship. The creature serves as a constant reminder of Victor’s transgressions against nature and robs him of the material happiness he may have obtained had he not arrogantly trespassed against the laws of nature.

Regardless of which interpretation one uses, the creature and Victor are inextricably linked. For the creature, Victor is an object of both reverence and rage. For Victor, the creature is an object of both disgust and guilt. Neither is wholly innocent, and they both die miserable deaths. However, the final injustice in the creature’s cruel life is that for all his efforts to render Victor as lonely and miserable as himself, his creator still has a friend left to mourn him in the form of Robert Walton. The creature, left purposeless and empty after Victor’s death, sets out to end his own life so as to dissuade anyone else from trying to replicate Victor’s mistakes.

**Characters: Robert Walton**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Robert Walton is the narrator of the novel’s frame story and his letters to his sister Margaret convey Victor’s story to readers. His ship rescues Victor during an expedition in the arctic and Victor and Walton become friends. Victor tells Walton his life story and cautions the younger man against pursuing forbidden knowledge. At the start of the novel, Walton is a young, self-educated man who hopes to uncover new knowledge and make an impact on the world by exploring the arctic. However, after his encounter with Victor, he reluctantly turns back towards England at the behest of his crew, unfulfilled but ultimately wiser.
In his letters to his sister, Walton comes across much like a young Victor. He hopes to uncover new knowledge by exploring the arctic, and he hopes to obtain mastery over nature, just as Victor once sought to obtain mastery over death. However, he also shares several qualities with the creature—specifically his loneliness and his being self-educated. Walton represents a balance between the creature’s anguished loneliness and Victor’s unchecked arrogance. Like Victor, he seems to come from a loving family that encourages his fanciful ambitions. However, like the creature, he is aware of his own inadequacies and lacks a friend with whom he can share his innermost thoughts and feelings; however, Walton possesses a belief in his intellectual superiority and claims he can’t find companionship with his crew members. To Walton, Victor is a welcome intellectual equal, and he admires Victor, expressing a desire for his friendship. Walton also shows a willingness to listen to the creature’s story, speaking to his understanding of another lonely soul. Walton is the perfect person to hear both Victor’s story and the creature’s story since he is able to empathize with both.

Walton also displays a degree of sensitivity that neither the creature nor Victor possess. In their mutual isolation, both Victor and the creature disregarded the feelings and opinions of others in pursuit of their selfish goals. By contrast, Walton, however reluctantly, listens to his crew and turns back to England instead of pursuing the creature and his own ambitions to journey further into the arctic. More so than either Victor or the creature, Walton is a compassionate and thoughtful person who sets aside his own selfish impulses for the good of his crew.

Both Victor and the creature recount their stories to Walton in a sort of confession prior to death. For Victor, Walton represents the chance to end the secrecy that has ruined his life. Though he falls short of true redemption, Victor can at least die knowing that one living soul might benefit from his mistakes. For the creature, Walton represents his final opportunity to forge a human connection. Though their acquaintance falls short of the friendship that Walton shared with Victor, the creature can now die knowing that someone is left behind to remember the injustices of his life.

**Minor Characters: Henry Clerval**

Henry Clerval is Victor’s boyhood friend from Geneva. He is described as a gentle, handsome, and morally upright man who enjoys adventure. Like Victor, he hopes to make a positive impact on humanity, but he lacks the arrogance that corrupts Victor’s goals. After convincing his father to permit him to advance his studies, Clerval comes to the University of Ingolstadt in the hopes of gaining mastery over Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit. An adventurer at heart, Clerval hopes to travel to the east as a trader and explorer.

Clerval primarily serves as a foil for Victor in that he balances out Victor’s brooding, scientific mind with his own cheerful, morally upright disposition. Clerval nurses Victor back to health after Victor is rendered despondent by his shame over the hideous creature he has created. However, Henry is ultimately killed by the creature as revenge for Victor’s destruction of the female creature, inciting Victor to seek vengeance against the creature. Victor is later blamed for Clerval’s death, but he is acquitted due to a lack of sufficient evidence.

**Minor Characters: Elizabeth Lavenza**

Elizabeth Lavenza is Victor’s adoptive sister. She is beautiful and kind, and Victor’s parents hope that her and Victor will someday marry. This comes to fruition after Elizabeth proves to be the only person capable of alleviating Victor’s depression after Clerval’s death. Elizabeth’s death highlights Victor’s selfish nature, as his arrogant assumption that the creature planned to kill him on his wedding night prevents him from warning Elizabeth about the potential dangers of marrying him.

Elizabeth is also shown to have a strong sense of justice, as she is Justine Moritz’s chief defender during Justine’s murder trial. Though the evidence is stacked against Justine, Elizabeth still comes forward in her
defense and believes in her innocence until the end. This contrasts Elizabeth with Victor, who keeps quiet despite his knowing that the creature is the real murderer.

**Minor Characters: Justine Moritz**

Justine Moritz is a servant of the Frankenstein family. The Frankensteins adopted her after she was abandoned by her mother, and she is dearly loved by the entire family. After the creature murders William Frankenstein, he puts a valuable trinket he took from William’s body into a sleeping Justine’s pocket, framing her for the murder. Though she is innocent, Justine confesses to the murder in order to ensure that her soul will be fit to go to heaven when she dies. This ultimately leads to her death, as no amount of testimony can counteract her direct confession. Justine’s trial highlights Victor’s selfishness and dishonesty. Though he knows that Justine is innocent, he refuses to come forward about the creature and instead allows an innocent woman to die in order to keep his secret.

**Minor Characters: The De Laceys**

The De Laceys are a peasant family that the creature observes for a time. The patriarch, Mr. De Lacey, and his two children, Felix and Agatha, are former Parisian nobles who were exiled after they came to the defense of a wrongly accused Turkish merchant. The daughter of the merchant, Safie, falls in love with Felix and eventually leaves her own family to join the exiled De Laceys. They are a loving family, and though they live in poverty, they seem happy just to be together.

The creature greatly admires them and learns how to speak by observing Felix’s attempts to help Safie learn French. In his quest for human companionship, the creature approaches the blind Mr. De Lacey in the hopes of befriending the family. However, when Felix, Agatha, and Safie arrive and witness the creature as he benignly kneels at Mr. De Lacey’s feet, they assume that the creature is trying to harm Mr. De Lacey. Felix then attacks the creature with a stick. The De Laceys’ rejection is a source of great pain for the creature; he becomes disillusioned with humans after being treated so poorly by the family which he had only ever seen as kind and good.

**Minor Characters: Alphonse**

Alphonse Frankenstein is Victor’s father. He is one of the most influential men in Geneva, holding both wealth and prestige. He is a loving father, and he and his wife dote on all of their children. He allows Victor to pursue his ambitions, while also reminding him that there is more to life than books and science. Alphonse dies from grief after Elizabeth’s murder, and his death is attributed indirectly to both Victor and the creature.

**Minor Characters: Caroline**

Caroline Frankenstein is Victor’s mother. She is a kind and benevolent woman, adopting several children in addition to having three of her own. She loves all of her children deeply and hopes that Victor and Elizabeth will someday marry. She dies shortly before Victor leaves for university, and her death influences his obsession with conquering death.

**Minor Characters: William**

William is Victor’s youngest brother. He is the darling of the Frankenstein family, beloved for his attractive appearance and charming demeanor. William is the first person killed by the creature. William’s death forces
the creature to confront his own capacity for destruction, which he intends to employ as a means of exacting
vengeance against Victor. William’s death also serves as the catalyst for Justine’s trial and execution, as she is
accused of his murder.

**Minor Characters: Ernest**

Ernest Frankenstein is the middle child of the Frankenstein family. Six years younger than Victor, he is sickly
and disinclined towards academic pursuits, with Elizabeth suggesting that he ought to become a farmer.
Though his fate is left ambiguous, he may be the only surviving member of the Frankenstein family.

**Minor Characters: Mr. Kirwin**

Mr. Kirwin is the magistrate who accuses Victor of murdering Henry Clerval. However, after Victor falls ill
from grief and shock, Mr. Kirwin shows compassion and nurses him back to health.

**Minor Characters: M. Waldman**

M. Waldman is a professor of chemistry at the University of Ingolstadt. He is a charismatic and attractive
50-year-old man. Unlike M. Krempe, M. Waldman is not dismissive of Victor’s interest in alchemy. Rather,
he credits the alchemists with paving the way for chemists and other future scientists. Victor credits M.
Waldman with indirectly inspiring his desire to create the creature by drawing a clear link between alchemy
and science.

**Minor Characters: M. Krempe**

M. Krempe is a professor of natural philosophy at the University of Ingolstadt. Victor describes his
appearance as “repulsive.” M. Krempe openly mocks Victor’s interest in alchemy but is nonetheless
impressed with Victor’s progress during his time at the University.

**Minor Characters: Margaret Saville**

Margaret Saville is Robert Walton’s sister. All of Walton’s letters are addressed to her, and the contents of his
letters suggest that the two share a close relationship.

**Critical Essays: Sample Essay Outlines**

- **Topic #1**
  Discuss the true nature and personality of the creature in Shelley’s Frankenstein.

  **Outline**
  I. Thesis Statement: Although the creature behaves viciously and murders several people, he is not
  inherently evil or malicious.

  II. Creation of the creature
  A. The creature as a product of Victor Frankenstein:
     1. Construction of creature from body parts
     2. Victor brings the creature to life
3. Rejection of the creature by Frankenstein
4. Confusion and pain of rejection
5. Experience of physical senses
6. Emotional response
B. The creature as a lost innocent:
1. Wanders in the woods, alone and confused
2. Discovery of food and fire
3. Seeking shelter from natural elements

III. The creature in society
A. Second rejection by humans:
1. The peasant flees from the creature
2. He is isolated from society
B. Creature understands he is repulsive to humans:
1. Prefers to hide in the forest, away from people
2. The creature realizes he is ugly
C. The benevolent nature of the creature:
1. Admiration of the De Lacey family
2. Anonymous acts of kindness towards the family
3. Appreciation of music and literature
4. Attempt to communicate with M. De Lacey
   a. Seeks companionship from the father
   b. Experiences sadness instead of anger at Felix’s attack
5. Burns down cottage after De Laceys move out
   a. First violent act in response to rejection
D. The creature attempts to save the drowning girl:
1. Attacked by girl’s father
2. Further rejection by society

IV. Creature’s relationship with Frankenstein
A. Rejection and abandonment by “father”:
B. Creature discovers identity of his creator:
1. Creature experiences true rage
C. Creature demands a mate from Frankenstein:
1. Only wants to be left alone with a companion
2. Promises not to harm anyone
D. Creature’s last hope destroyed by his creator:
1. Frankenstein tears apart the mate
2. Creature vows revenge
3. Kills Henry and Elizabeth
E. Frankenstein becomes as miserable as his creature:
1. His loved ones are dead
2. He feels responsible and guilty over their deaths

V. The creature’s true nature and desires
A. Love and acceptance by society
B. Companionship
C. An end to his lonely isolation
D. Final desire: a fiery, anonymous death;
1. Creature understands he can never find peace or happiness in human society
E. The creature as a product of society:
1. Prejudice and behavior of humans

VI. Conclusion

• Topic #2
Illustrate Mary Shelley’s use of Romantic concepts in Frankenstein.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Frankenstein is a classic example of literature written in the Romantic tradition.

II. Romanticism
A. History of romanticism in literature and the arts:
1. Examples
B. Characteristics of Romantic literature:
1. Feelings and emotionalism vs. intellect
2. Emotional response of characters
3. Nonrealistic portrayal of characters
4. Dramatic settings
   a. Mountain landscapes
   b. Germany and the Rhine
   c. Scotland
5. Bizarre stories and events
C. Major Romantic writers:
1. Mary Shelley
2. Percy Bysshe Shelley
3. Lord George Gordon Byron
4. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge
5. Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen
6. Edgar Allan Poe and the American movement

III. Romantic elements in Frankenstein

A. Bizarre story of monster and creation:
1. Unexplained events
2. Strange creature
B. Characters driven by emotional need:
1. Creature
   a. Need for love and acceptance
   b. Loneliness and desire for revenge
2. Victor Frankenstein
   a. Love of friends and family
   b. Despair and shock
   c. Revenge against creature
3. Elizabeth Lavenza
   a. Love of Victor and family
   b. Belief in Justine’s innocence
   c. Self-sacrifice for Victor
4. Robert Walton
   a. Desire for close, loving friend
5. Henry Clerval
   a. Close, loyal friend and companion
C. Romantic settings:
1. Switzerland and the Alps
2. Ingolstadt
3. Scotland and Orkney Islands
4. The Arctic
D. Emotional events:
1. Death of Caroline Beaufort
2. Adoption of children by Frankensteins
3. Death of William Frankenstein
4. Trial of Justine Moritz
5. Death of Henry Clerval
6. Marriage of Victor and Elizabeth
7. Murder of Elizabeth
8. Death of Victor Frankenstein
E. Creature as a natural man
1. Idea of the “Noble Savage”

IV. Conclusion

• Topic #3
Victor’s driving, obsessive ambition ruined his life and led to his own death and the murder of his loved ones. Illustrate how ambition affects not only Victor and Robert Walton, but also the creature in Frankenstein.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Ambition and the quest for knowledge is a fatal flaw in the characters of Victor Frankenstein, Robert Walton, and the creature.

II. Victor Frankenstein’s obsession
A. Curiosity and desire for knowledge:
   1. As a boy, sees lightning strike tree
   2. Study of Agrippa and Paracelsus
B. Attends University of Ingolstadt:
   1. Influence of M. Waldman
   2. Intensive study and experimentation
   3. Loses contact with family and friends
C. Creation of a monster:
   1. Ambition blinds him to reality of creation
      a. Thinks creature will be beautiful
   2. Confronted with living creature
   3. Horrified at what he has created
D. Life destroyed by his creation:
   1. Family and friends killed
   2. No hope for future
   3. Sinks into black hole of anger and revenge

III. The creature’s quest for knowledge
A. Creature as a blank innocent:
   1. Is benevolent, but knows nothing
   2. Wants to be accepted
B. Is exposed to world of knowledge:
   1. Observation of De Lacey family
   2. Books, music, and loving relationships
3. Learns to read and write
C. Desires knowledge and understanding of world:
1. Reads Paradise Lost and other works
2. Reads Victor’s journal
D. Acquires a terrible knowledge:
1. Understands who he is and how he was created
2. Realizes he is doomed to lifelong misery
E. Becomes obsessed with notion of revenge:
1. Murders innocent people
2. Devotes life to torment of Victor
3. Seeks release in fiery death

IV. Walton’s expedition
A. Walton’s obsessive quest:
1. Like Victor, spends years pursuing dream
B. Confronted with reality of hardship and pain:
1. Could destroy crew and himself
C. Learns from Victor and ultimately abandons quest

V. Conclusion

Critical Essays: Suggested Essay Topics

Volume One: Letters One through Four
1. Why do you think Robert Walton is so eager to visit such a hostile environment?

2. Discuss the similarities between Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein, the man he rescues. Why does Walton feel such compassion for Victor, a total stranger?

3. Why is Walton so impressed with the shipmaster’s actions regarding his fiancée?

4. What Romantic concepts do the characters of Victor and Walton illustrate?

Volume One: Chapters One and Two
1. Victor is deeply affected by Caroline’s death. Discuss Victor’s reaction to his mother’s death and the influence it has on his scientific studies.

2. Discuss Victor’s friendship with Henry Clerval and compare it to his father’s relationship with Beaufort.

3. What is “modern science” as explained by M. Waldman, and how does it differ from the theories of Agrippa and the other scientists Victor studies?

Volume One: Chapters Three, Four, and Five
1. Why do you think Victor created such a horrible-looking creature? Did he realize what he was doing? Explain your answer.

2. What are some of the characteristics of the Gothic novel, and how does Mary Shelley use them in these chapters?
3. Victor tells us that his friend Clerval’s imagination was “too vivid for the minutiae of science.” What does he mean by this?

**Volume One: Chapters Six and Seven**
1. After Justine is accused of William’s murder, why do you think Victor never tells anyone about the creature?

2. Explain why Justine confesses to the crime, even though she is innocent.

3. Discuss Victor’s experience with lightning and Shelley’s use of it when Victor sees the creature.

**Volume Two: Chapters One and Two**
1. The creature tells Frankenstein: “misery made me a fiend.” Do you think the creature’s unhappiness justifies his murderous behavior? Explain your answer using examples from the text.

2. Victor contemplates suicide while sailing on the lake, and again when climbing the mountain. Discuss the change in Victor’s personality from his university days.

**Volume Two: Chapters Three, Four, and Five**
1. Describe the creature’s feelings towards Victor when he first came to life. How do they differ from Victor’s first reaction to his creation?

2. Discuss the creature’s attitude towards knowledge. Why does learning new things excite him and at the same time cause him so much pain?

3. Explain how the creature feels towards the peasant family. Why do you think he is so moved by their gentleness and kindness?

**Volume Two: Chapters Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine**
1. Discuss the Romantic notion of good and evil. How does it relate to the creature’s actions so far?

2. Explain why the creature feels it is so important to come out of hiding and talk to the elder De Lacey.

3. Describe how the creature feels when he finds Victor’s journal in his pocket.

**Volume Three: Chapters One and Two**
1. Victor says of his father that “a more indulgent and less dictatorial parent did not exist upon earth.” Discuss Alphonse’s influence on Victor and Victor’s feelings towards his father.

2. Give some examples of the Romantic concept in Shelley’s use of physical locations. How does it help establish character and mood in the novel?

**Volume Three: Chapters Three and Four**
1. Discuss Victor’s reluctance to create the second creature. Why do you think he destroys it in front of the other creature?

2. What does the creature mean when he tells Victor, “I shall be with you on your wedding night”?

3. Compare Alphonse’s and Victor’s relationship to Victor’s relationship with the creature.
Volume Three: Chapters Five and Six
1. Compare the events that occur on Victor’s wedding night to the night when Victor destroyed the second creature.

2. Did it surprise you that the creature killed Elizabeth and not Victor? Explain your answer.

3. Why do you think Victor finally tells the magistrate about the creature?

Volume Three: Chapter Seven
1. When Victor is chasing him, why does the creature keep leaving clues to help Victor follow his trail?

2. Do you think Victor is right when he urges Walton to abandon his ambition? Explain your answer.

3. Is Victor justified in blaming himself for the deaths of Henry, Elizabeth, and his other family members? Explain your answer.

4. Discuss the creature’s final speech to Walton. How does he really feel about Victor? Is he sad or happy about his death?

5. Why do you think the creature wants to eliminate any evidence of his own existence?

Critical Essays: Critical Survey of Science Fiction and Fantasy Frankenstein Analysis

Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* as part of a friendly ghost story writing competition with her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and friend Lord Byron when she was eighteen years old. The novel has prompted many melodramatic takeoffs in film and much critical interest. It is one of the earliest works of science fiction, and the scientific techniques described in it are shadowy at best, yet they represent adequately the scientific knowledge of the time.

The book’s subtitle links it to the Prometheus myth, popular in the Romantic era. Both Percy Shelley and Lord Byron wrote Promethean poems. Prometheus, a Titan, stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans, allowing them to thrive and create. Frankenstein’s creature was brought to life through the “fire” of lightning. In both cases, the reader must wonder whether the powers given to humankind are blessings or curses. The novel questions what responsibility humankind has in the face of achievements that can have both good and bad results. Frankensteins suffering clearly shows that he realizes too late that he miscalculated the destructive potential of his discovery.

The novel is filled with imagery of light and dark. The creature, brought to life through the power of lightning, is always in the shadows of darkness, and he commits dark deeds.

The Romantic writers with whom Shelley can be connected wrote in part as a revolt against the Enlightenment assumption that scientific advances and education represent the highest possibilities of humankind. If scientific achievement is paramount to Frankenstein, it comes at the expense of humanity, including the lives of everyone whom Frankenstein loves. *Frankenstein* offers interesting views of the psyche of man in both Frankenstein and his creature, and of the social damage that can result when love is denied, as it was to the creature, or relegated to low status, as it was by Frankenstein. A psychological inquiry also suggests the idea of the creature being the double, or dark side, of Frankenstein.
One interesting stylistic device in the novel is the lack of a constant or reliable narrator: Robert Walton, Frankenstein, and the creature all tell their own stories. The reader thus is given different points of view from which to judge the story. Another point of interest is the consideration of gender: The novel has a female author, employs stereotyped female characters, and shows contrasts between the typically male and female motives of ambition and love.

Critical Essays: Masterplots II: Juvenile & Young Adult Literature Series Frankenstein Analysis

Because many young readers come to *Frankenstein* with preconceived ideas of the content, derived from a plethora of television and film renditions, the complexity and ambivalence of the actual text may present a challenge. The epistolary structure of the novel is important, as readers never hear the monster’s tale directly. It is always filtered through Frankenstein’s narration, Walton’s writings, or both.

Resonating through the novel is Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), a poem that Mary Shelley knew well and quotes in the text. Like the Mariner, Frankenstein is compelled to tell his tale to one who might profit from it. Unlike the Mariner, however, there is no evidence that Frankenstein has gained clear insight into himself and repented. When he, near death from cold and exhaustion, first accosts Walton, he verifies that their direction is north before accepting help. Later, he eloquently pleads with Walton’s men to remain steadfast in their exploration no matter what the danger or the cost. He tells Walton that he finds nothing blameable in his past conduct. Dying, he urges Walton to seek happiness in tranquillity and avoid ambition. His final words throw this self-awareness into doubt, however, for he admits that while his own hopes were blasted, someone else might succeed.

In Coleridge’s tale, the listener goes away a sadder and a wiser man. Walton, who has listened to both Frankenstein and the monster, does likewise, his idealism tempered by an acknowledgement of human frailty and balanced with a more wholesome realization of the need for close human ties. He turns the ship south, putting commitment to the needs of his men ahead of his desire for renown and glory. Frankenstein and the monster remain ambivalent characters. There is much to applaud and appreciate in Frankenstein’s driving ambition and much to pity in his gradual abandonment of all human affection and his obsession first with the pursuit of knowledge and then of revenge. In the monster, there is much with which to sympathize and much to condemn. One reason that Shelley’s book has remained popular is that it captures modern humanity’s paradoxical fascination with gaining control of nature through scientific discoveries and fear of what those discoveries can unleash.

The novel can be interpreted in several ways. Because the original edition bears a quotation from *Paradise Lost* and because the monster derives all of his theology from that work, it is easy to see in *Frankenstein* an analogy for God’s creation of human beings and their exile to a world of pain and loss after the Fall, which might be taken as God’s rejection. In addition, what psychologist Sigmund Freud would later define as the id often takes the shape of a double. It is possible to see the monster as Frankenstein’s double and to find deeply repressed reasons for why Frankenstein would wish the death of the people whom the monster murders. One can also see Frankenstein as a symbol of reason and the monster as the emotion that he must suppress in order to achieve his ambitions; such feelings can be suppressed only temporarily, with disastrous consequences. Henry Clerval is in many ways a foil for Frankenstein and Walton. Like them, he is idealistic. Unlike them, he puts filial duty above ambition. While he achieves his goals, he does not do so at the expense of relationships, which always remain his major priority.
Critical Essays: Frankenstein

The plot revolves around Victor Frankenstein, who is dissatisfied with the limits of traditional knowledge and buries himself in scientific studies to discover hidden secrets of life and death. He succeeds brilliantly, ultimately becoming, like God, able to create life, but he pays a great price for his ambition, separating himself from nature, his family, and his fiancee.

Even the moment of his greatest success proves to be ominous. When his new creation comes to life, Victor is unwilling to face up to his responsibilities. He turns his back, spurning the being who should be his child or brother. As a result, the creature begins a life of alienation that turns him into a monster.

Ironically, the monster is articulate and sympathetic as he tells his own sad story. Although he is born in a state of innocence, constant mistreatment by everyone with whom he comes in contact makes him extremely bitter and causes him to strike back in a murderous rage at his creator, who turned him loose in a loveless world. The monster’s revenge comes when he robs Victor of his loved ones.

From this point on, the monster and Victor are bound together, not as the brothers they should have been but as deadly enemies. The quest to create life is completely perverted as Victor chases the monster across the barren, icy wilderness of the North Pole, where both of them perish.

The novel is thus an effective critique of man’s penchant for irresponsible creativity, his willingness to make scientific and technological experiments that may seriously threaten rather than serve his most important need for love, friendship, and tranquility. But Victor and the monster are not so much villains as they are typically ambiguous Romantic heroes: Victor fails miserably, but his quest is inspiring; and the monster, though a murderer, is also a victim, and an eloquent and sympathetic rebel against forces that violate his basic rights.

Bibliography:


Critical Essays: Masterpieces of Women's Literature
Frankenstein Analysis

Any interpretation of Shelley’s novel must come to terms with the central relationship between Victor and his creature. When one reads the monster’s story in his own words, it is impossible not to feel sympathy for him. As a result, Victor must share some of the blame for the monster’s violent acts. How much? How much other blame is to be uncovered in this novel that is so full of pain and death? Why, too, in this novel written by a woman are the female characters flat and uniformly blameless? The question Shelley’s contemporaries asked was, as she put it, “How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea?” Taken together, these questions seem to ask: What is this young woman writer saying about the masculine culture of her day?

Interpretations of the novel have seen considerable cultural criticism implicit in it. It has been read as a critique of modern science, for example. In this interpretation, Victor represents the tendency of science to divorce itself from ethics. As a scientist, Victor does not consider the consequences of his research, and he does not take responsibility for them when they are tragic. What is more, this lapse in Victor’s judgment arises in part from his absence from home, both literally and figuratively: In order to do his work, he must cut himself off from other human beings. Other interpretations of Victor have emerged. It has been argued that he represents the Byronic hero, the Faustian quality of the male Romantic poet. Shelley quotes often in the novel from the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the poems help to express Victor’s (and Walton’s) sense of isolation and the haunted, feverish energy that dooms them.

Other interpretations of Victor and his monster have focused on the scenario of bringing life into the world. Readers note that Mary Shelley had given birth to a baby who died the year before she began Frankenstein, that she gave birth to a son six months before she began the novel, and that another child was born only three months after she finished it. Thus there were concrete reasons that her mind might have been full of thoughts about childbearing and parents’ responsibilities. Still, readers have differed in the connections they have drawn between Victor’s monstrous creation and Shelley’s own childbirths. Some have seen parallels and insisted that for Shelley childbirth must have seemed in some ways a hideous process. Others have instead drawn a contrast between “natural” birth, the domain of the woman, and the “unnatural” creation that Victor undertakes and for which he is aptly punished. Still others have instead drawn connections between the creation of the monster and the writing of a book—a metaphor Shelley herself implies in her introduction.

Another fruitful parallel that can be drawn between the novel and Shelley’s life has to do with her apparent sympathy for the monster. Just as the monster gathered his education by eavesdropping in silence, as a kind of outlaw student, so Shelley describes herself as having listened silently to the many conversations about science and poetry taking place among Percy Shelley, her husband, the poet George Gordon, Lord Byron, and their male friends. As a woman writer in the company of men, she may well have felt herself to be monstrous—not visibly, perhaps, but deeply. In this interpretation, the monster represents all that the woman writer must repress. The creature’s murders enact violent urges, then, that symbolically vent private rage. This may help explain both the flatness of the female characters and the powerful sympathy readers feel for the monster.
It may also explain the potent afterlife of the monster, as he has survived in version after version of the story in popular culture. Until the revival of scholarly interest in the novel during the 1970’s, Frankenstein was probably more strongly associated with the horror film than with Shelley’s book. That seems appropriate for a work that, in its own day, was written in a little-respected popular genre: the gothic novel. Many elements of the gothic novel are present: hauntings and graveyards, murders and picturesque Continental settings, innocent young women who are victims. Yet Shelley did not simply write a formula gothic. The scientist and his creature, and the complex narrative structure with all of its interconnections, are strictly her own. In this novel, she at once comments on the gothic and raises it a notch in complexity.

Critical Essays: Critical Context

Mary Shelley was only eighteen when she wrote Frankenstein in response to a proposal by the poet Lord Byron, whom she and her husband, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, were visiting in Switzerland, that they each create a ghost story. Out of that evening’s entertainment, Frankenstein was born. Shelley discusses the inspiration for the novel in a preface that is included in most editions.

Widowed at the age of twenty-four, Shelley supported herself and her son through her writing. In addition to critical editions of her husband’s works, she wrote six other novels. None of them attained the popularity of Frankenstein, which she revised and republished in 1831. The novel spawned numerous stage adaptations, beginning as early as 1823. With the invention of film, the story saw new life in even greater variety. Of note among literary spinoffs of the basic tale is Brian Aldiss’ Frankenstein Unbound (1975), which features a time warp in which a contemporary American meets Mary Shelley and the monster. The original text of Frankenstein remains a complex and richly rewarding novel that invites readers to ponder their personal goals and ambitions as well as the direction toward which modern life is moving.

Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation

Frankenstein began as a short story written by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley while she was on summer vacation in Switzerland with her husband, poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and with poet Lord Byron and physician-writer John William Polidori. The novel was first published anonymously in 1818 and was then followed by a revised version in 1831, crediting Mary Shelley as the author and including an autobiographical introduction that reflects on her life and on the novel’s authorship.

The novel’s themes center on the social and cultural aspects of society during Shelley’s lifetime, including the movement away from the intellectually confining Enlightenment. The characters in the novel reflect the struggle against societal control. The monster, in particular, is an outcast from society, and the reader is able to empathize with his subsequent rage at being ostracized. Nature and science, opposing forces during this time period, are important themes shaping the novel.

Early nineteenth century society’s views of human standards were associated with the natural sciences. Some literary critics suggest that nature and physiology, specifically anatomy and reproduction, are linked in literature. Irregularities in the human standard were therefore viewed as unacceptable by society, and through an innate reaction, these differences were rejected. Even though Frankenstein’s monster develops language skills, emotion, and consciousness, he appears as a grotesque being and is spurned by society because he does not fit any ideal.

Shelley employs many stylistic techniques in Frankenstein. She uses explorer Robert Walton’s epistolary communication with his sister as part of an outer frame structure that segues into a flashback of Victor Frankenstein’s experiences leading up to and after the creation of the monster. First-person narrative is used in Walton’s voice, while the core chapters offer Victor’s personal narration. In addition, Shelley uses dialogue to
provide the thoughts of other characters, such as the monster. Also evident are characteristics of gothic horror, including a foreboding setting, violent and mysterious events, and a decaying society.

Many themes in *Frankenstein* represent not only the social and political theories of Shelley’s time but also those that followed. For example, Sigmund Freud’s Oedipus complex can be seen in Victor’s attempts to replace his deceased mother by “birthing” a being who represents her. Elaborating on this theory, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan adds a pre-Oedipal stage, in which young children learn language through nonverbal communication. This stage is evident in Victor’s attempt to learn the language of the sciences, and in the creature’s attempt to seek knowledge about society and language. Victor and the creature are “doubles” (or mirrors) of each other because they are both struck with the inability to successfully communicate with society. This theme demonstrates the balance of the conscious and unconscious aspects of human behavior.

Another theme, the search by the novel’s male protagonists for a teacher who will provide them political and social guidance, represents Lockean theory, which claims that education determines a person’s level of value in society. For example, during a conversation with Victor, Walton denounces his lack of formal education, demonstrating his lack of a friend (or formal teacher) to lead him to enlightenment. Additionally, Victor acknowledges his father’s lack of leadership in guiding his interest in the natural sciences.

Prior to the 1970’s, most criticism about *Frankenstein* focused on Shelley’s life and the story behind the novel’s authorship and creation. As the novel received increased critical attention, evaluations started to focus on its storyline and characters as a reflection of the author. This change in focus was, in part, due to the emergence of feminist theory in the 1970’s and 1980’s, a theory that began to establish the academic value and significance of female writers. Critics have evaluated the work’s lack of dominant female characters, but also have examined its attention to the idea of the Romantic artist.

*Frankenstein* has been further critiqued through the lens of gender. In the novel, the feminine is not central; rather, the novel features characters who have both masculine and feminine qualities. Furthermore, relationships between women figure in the novel, namely the relationship between Justine and Elizabeth. When Justine faces execution, the two establish a bond that begins during a brief conversation about their shared experiences. Female relationships were tenuous in Shelley’s own life, too, particularly because of the premature death of her mother and her questionable relationship with her half-sister, Jane (later known as Claire), who was rumored to have had a child with Shelley’s husband.

*Frankenstein* revolutionized the genres of gothic literature, science fiction, and horror stories, and elevated the status of the Romantic artist. Written by Shelley when she was only nineteen years old, the novel offers artistic flare, originality, and a maturity beyond Shelley’s age. In the last decades of the twentieth century, this work reached a new status in critical evaluation. It remains an undisputed fictional masterpiece.

**Critical Essays: Critical Overview**

When Mary finished her novel in May 1817, Percy Shelley sent her manuscript, under an anonymous name, to two different publishers, both of whom rejected it. Lakington, Allen, and Co. finally accepted it. Early reviews of the work were generally mixed. As quoted in Diane Johnson’s introduction to the novel, a critic for *The Edinburgh Review* found that “taste and judgement [sic] alike revolted at this kind of writing,” and “it inculcates no lesson of conduct, manner of morality; it cannot mend, and will not even amuse its readers unless their tastes have been deplorably vitiated.” A writer from the *Monthly Review*, as quoted by Montague Summers in *The Gothic Quest*, claimed that the setting was so improbable—the story so unbelievable—that it was "an uncouth story . . . leading to no conclusion either moral or philosophical." Even though this conclusion regarding the novel’s lack of moral implications seems absurd to readers today, most of the earliest unfavorable reviews related to the story’s grotesque or sensationalist elements. On the other hand, some early
reviewers enjoyed the novel's uniqueness and praised the author's genius. As Johnson related Sir Walter Scott stated in *Blackwood's Edinburgh* magazine that he was impressed with "the high idea of the author's original genius and happy power of expression." The rest of England seemed to agree with Scott's opinion, since so many readers enjoyed *Frankenstein*. The novel resembled many works of the popular gothic genre, but it also became one of the triumphs of the Romantic movement. People identified with its themes of alienation and isolation and its warning about the destructive power that can result when human creativity is unfettered by moral and social concerns. Even if readers did not identify the Romantic themes present in Shelley's novel, the sensationalist elements piqued interest in other forms of dramatization.

In 1823, the English Opera House performed *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein*, and fourteen other dramatizations were staged within three years of the play's premiere. The Opera House, in fact, used the protests against this play to further its own interests. As Steven Forry notes in his book *Hideous Progenies: Dramatizations of Frankenstein from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, public outrage regarding the "immoral tendency" heightened the appeal of both the play and the book. Eventually, the various dramatizations shaped Shelley's characters to fit whatever popular appeal would draw audiences to the playhouses. (©eNotes) Even today, numerous film adaptations distort the novel's original story, especially concerning the creature's very complex response to his world.

Since the 1800s, *Frankenstein* has continued to appeal to a wide audience. Criticism of the novel represents a diverse range of approaches. These include feminist interpretations, which describe the novel as reflecting Shelley's deepest fears of motherhood. Marxist analyses explore the effects of the poor versus the bourgeois families (the De Lacey's versus the Frankenstein's). In addition, some critics have focused on psychoanalysis, interpreting Dr. Frankenstein and the monster as embodying Sigmund Freud's theory of id and ego. Today, much critical focus seems to rest on the autobiographical elements of *Frankenstein*, as critics wish to rightfully consider Shelley as one of the leading Romantic writers of her day.

**Essays and Criticism: In the Context of the Romantic Era**

Perhaps no book is more of its age than *Frankenstein*. Written and published in 1816-1818, *Frankenstein* typifies the most important ideas of the Romantic era, among them the primacy of feelings, the dangers of intellect, dismay over the human capacity to corrupt our natural goodness, the agony of the questing, solitary hero, and the awesome power of the sublime. Its Gothic fascination with the dual nature of humans and with the figurative power of dreams anticipates the end of the nineteenth century and the discovery of the unconscious and the dream life. The story of its creation, which the author herself tells in a "Preface" to the third edition to the book (1831), is equally illuminating about its age. At nineteen, Mary Godwin was living in the summer of 1816 with the poet Percy Shelley, visiting another famous Romantic poet, Lord Byron, and his doctor at Byron's Swiss villa when cold, wet weather drove them all indoors. Byron proposed that they entertain themselves by writing, each of them, a ghost story. On an evening when Byron and Shelley had been talking about galvanism and human life, whether an electric current could be passed through tissue to animate it Mary Shelley went to bed and in a half-dream state thought of the idea for *Frankenstein*. She awoke from the nightmarish vision of a "pale student of unhallowed arts" terrified by the "yellow, watery . . . eyes" of his creation staring at him to stare herself at the moon outside rising over the Alps. The next morning she wrote the first sentence of chapter five: "It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils." With Percy Shelley's encouragement and in spite of a failed childbirth and the suicide of a half-sister, over the next several months she worked on the story. It was completed in 1817 and published the following year, the only successful "ghost" story of that evening, perhaps the most widely known ever written.

Shelley's was an age in which heart triumphed over head. Frankenstein's moral failure is his heedless pursuit to know all that he might about life without taking any responsibility for his acts. His "sin" is not solely in creating the monster, but in abandoning him to orphanhood at his birth. The monster's unnatural birth is the
product of what the Romantic poet Wordsworth called humankind's "meddling intellect." Childlike in his innocence, the monster wants only to be loved, but he gets love from neither his "father" nor from any other in the human community.

Behind the novel's indictment of the intellect stand three important myths to which Shelley alludes. She subtitles her book "A Modern Prometheus," linking Victor Frankenstein to the heroic but ultimately tragic figure of Greek myth who contended with the gods, stole fire from them to give to humans, and was punished by Zeus by being chained on Mount Caucasus to have vultures eat his liver. Her husband Percy Shelley wrote a closet drama, Prometheus Unbound, and fellow Romantic poets Byron and Coleridge were also attracted to and wrote about a figure of defiant ambition. The story of Faust, like the Prometheus myth, also involves one who would trade everything to satisfy an aggressive and acquisitive intellect. Finally, Adam's fall from grace came of his eating of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. All are unhappy with the limits life places on them; all challenge those limits; all suffer great loss. Such is Victor Frankenstein's story, one which Walton appears about to replicate on his journey to the Pole. Walton tells Frankenstein,

"I would sacrifice my fortune, my existence, my every hope, to the furtherance of my enterprise. One man's life or death were but a small price to pay for the acquirement of the knowledge which I sought, for the dominion I should acquire and transmit over the elemental foes of our race."

Frankenstein, to whom "life and death appeared . . . ideal bounds" to be broken through, succeeds in his intellectual pursuit but at great cost. He loses friend, brother, and wife. He loses all contact and sympathy with the human community. At both the beginning and end of the novel, he is the most alienated figure, alone, in mad pursuit in a desolate spot on the earth.

The novel's structure enhances these ideas. It is a framed narrative with a story within a story within a story. At the outer layer the novel is framed by the letters which Walton writes to his sister while he is voyaging to the Pole, a Frankenstein-like figure consumed by an intellectual ambition, heedless of feeling, alienated and unbefriended. His drama is internal, his isolation all the more clear in the one-way communication the letters afford. The next layer is Frankenstein's story, told because he has the opportunity before his death to deter one like himself from the same tragic consequences. Finally, although the novel is titled Frankenstein, the monster is at its structural center, his voice the most compelling because the most felt. Perhaps not co-incidentally, in the popular imagination, the word "Frankenstein" conjures in most minds not Victor but the monster, although popular treatments of the story on stage and film have half-misconstrued Shelley's purpose by focusing only on the monster as a terrible being.

That the monster begs for our pity, that he descends from his native-born goodness to become a "malignant devil," illustrates another notion familiar to Shelley generally in her age and particularly in her family. Her father, William Godwin, had written Political Justice (1793) and her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, had written A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), both works on social injustices. These leading philosophical radicals of the day believed that, as Rousseau put it, "Man is born free and is everywhere in chains," that in our civilizations we corrupt what is by nature innocent. The monster is not evil, he is transformed into evil by a human injustice, an Adam made into a Satan. "I was benevolent and good," he says; "misery made me a fiend." The DeLaceys, unjustly expelled from society, represent the possibility of our restoration to native goodness in retreat from society amid the sublime splendors of the Alps. Old Mr. DeLacey tells the Monster that "the hearts of men, when unprejudiced by any obvious self-interest, are full of brotherly love and charity." The monster sees in the DeLaceys the loving family he has never known and their simple cottage life is a model of the happily primitive which the Romantics idealized.

If Frankenstein is a book of its age, it also looks ahead to its century's end when interest in the human psyche uncovered the unconscious mind. The idea of the Doppleganger, the double who shadows us, had been around
since the origins of the Gothic novel in the 1760s. By the end of the nineteenth century, works such as Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* made the idea that we had more than one self common. Capable of both great good and evil, we had, it seemed, a "monster" always potentially within us and not always under our control. Freud's splitting of the psyche put the monster-like id at the core of our persons. Freudian readings of *Frankenstein* see the monster as the outward expression of Victor's id or his demoniacal passions. In other words, Victor and the monster are the same person. Hence, Victor must keep the monster secret. His hope to create a being "like myself" is fulfilled in the monster whose murders we must see as expressions of Victor's own desires. Victor calls himself "the true murderer" of lustine, who, along with his brother William, he labels "the first hapless victims to my unhallowed arts." Driven by remorse, he wanders "like an evil spirit," his own wandering a mirror image of the monster's. When we see both in the outer frame of the book, Victor pursues the monster, but it is the monster who has pursued Victor, whom he calls "my last victim." Since Victor's story is a story of creation, murder, investigation, and pursuit, *Frankenstein* is ultimately a book about our pursuit of self-discovery, about the knowledge of the monster within us.

Devices conventional in both gothic novels and novels of more modern psychological interest appear in *Frankenstein*. Victor's passions frequently induce lapses in consciousness; his nightmares beg for interpretation. The most powerful occurs at one in the morning on the evening he succeeds in animating the corpse. He dreams that he sees Elizabeth walking the streets of Ingolstadt "in the bloom of health," but when he kisses her, she appears deathlike and is transformed into the corpse of his dead mother. When he awakens from the horror of his sleep, his monstrous creation looms over him. Frankenstein flees. Victor creates a monster and the nightmare hints that the monster of his desire is to take Elizabeth's life, perhaps because, as some suggest, unconsciously he holds her responsible for his mother's death.

The implications of the perverse in the sexual relationships of the characters also seem well served by a Freudian reading. Frankenstein is the monster's "father," yet were he to agree to the monster's demand to create for him a bride, would his next offspring be a "sister"? That hint of the incestuous is echoed in Victor's marriage to Elizabeth. An orphan brought home by Mrs. Frankenstein, she seems to the young Victor his possession, and though they "called each other familiarly by the name of cousin," Victor acknowledges that the ambiguity of their relationship defied naming. "No word, no expression could body forth the kind of relation in which she stood to me—my more than sister, since till death she was to be mine only." The monster's threat—"I shall be with you on your wedding night"—puts the monster in the nuptial bed with his "father" and his father's "sister/bride." That the novel closes with the monster's killing of the "father" pleads for an Oedipal reading which Freud's arguments regarding infantile sexuality and the competition within the birth family for the love of the mother made possible.

Numerous psychological readings of the novel have focused on Mary Shelley's life. Ellen Moers proposed that in *Frankenstein* Shelley wrestled with the pain of birth. Her own mother died only days after she was born, and Mary's firstborn died the year before she began the novel. Later, she referred to the book as "my hideous progeny." More recent feminist interpretations, such as that by Gilbert and Gubar noting that the novel is about a motherless orphan, similarly point to Mary's youth and remind us that books and children and birth and death are so mixed in both Shelley's life and in the novel that one cannot be understood without the other.

*Frankenstein* shocked readers in 1818 for its monstrous impiety, but its fame seemed fixed at birth. Initial reviews, politically oriented, denounced the book as a bit of radical Godwinism, since the book was dedicated to William Godwin and many presumed that its anonymous author was Percy Shelley. A stage adaptation called *Presumption, or, The Fate of Frankenstein* appeared as early as 1823. Mary Shelley attended a performance. In Shelley's life two additional editions were published; numerous editions since then have appeared. Burlesques on stage began in the late 1840s and continued to the end of the century. Thomas Edison created a film version as early as 1910, followed by the most famous film version, in 1931, starring Boris Karloff. It fixed for several generations an idea of "the monster Frankenstein," which gave birth to numerous
other films and parodies of the story which continue to the present. In film, in translation into many of the world's languages, in its presence in school curricula, and in an unending body of criticism, *Frankenstein* lives well beyond its young author's modest intentions to write an entertaining Gothic tale to pass some time indoors on a cold Swiss summer evening.

Source: George V. Griffith, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1997. Griffith is a professor of English and philosophy at Chadron State College in Chadron, Nebraska.

**Essays and Criticism: Frankenstein's Fallen Angel**

Quite apart from its enduring celebrity, and its proliferation in numberless extraliterary forms, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; or, The Modern Prometheus is a remarkable work. *su generis*, if a novel at all, it is a unique blending of Gothic, fabulist, allegorical, and philosophical materials. Though certainly one of the most calculated and *willed* of fantasies, being in large part a kind of gloss upon or rejoinder to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, *Frankenstein* is fueled by the kind of grotesque, faintly absurd, and wildly inventive images that spring direct from the unconscious: the eight-foot creature designed to be "beautiful," who turns out almost indescribably repulsive (yellow-skinned, shriveled of countenance, with straight black lips and near-colorless eyes); the cherished cousin-bride who is beautiful but, in the mind's dreaming, yields horrors ("As I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death, her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds"); the mad dream of the Arctic as a country of "eternal light" that will prove, of course, only a place of endless ice, the appropriate landscape for Victor Frankenstein's death and his demon's self-immolation.

Central to *Frankenstein*—as it is central to a vastly different nineteenth-century romance, *Jane Eyre*—is a stroke of lightning that appears to issue in a dazzling "stream of fire" from a beautiful old oak tree ("So soon the light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump"): the literal stimulus for Frankenstein's subsequent discovery of the cause of generation and life. And according to Mary Shelley's prefatory account of the origin of her "ghost story," the very image of Frankenstein and his demon-creature sprang from a waking dream of extraordinary vividness:

> I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bound of revene. I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion. . . . The student sleeps: but he is awakened; he opens his eyes, behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes.

Hallucinatory and surrealist on its deepest level, *Frankenstein* is of course one of the most self-consciously literary "novels" ever written: its awkward form is the epistolary Gothic; its lyric descriptions of natural scenes (the grandiose Valley of Chamounx in particular) spring from Romantic sources; its speeches and monologues echo both Shakespeare and Milton; and, should the author's didactic intention not be clear enough, the demon-creature educates himself by studying three books of symbolic significance—Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, Plutarch's *Lives*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. (The last conveniently supplies him with a sense of his own predicament, as Mary Shelley hopes to dramatize it. He reads Milton's great epic as if it were a "true history" giving the picture of an omnipotent God warring with His creatures; he identifies himself with Adam, except so far as Adam had come forth from God a "perfect creature, happy and prosperous." Finally, of course, he identifies with Satan: "I am thy creature: I ought to be thy Adam; but I am
rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous."

The search of medieval alchemists for the legendary philosophers' stone (the talismanic process by which base metals might be transformed into gold or, in psychological terms, the means by which the individual might realize his destiny), Faust's reckless defiance of human limitations and his willingness to barter his soul for knowledge, the fatal search of such tragic figures as Oedipus and Hamlet for answers to the mysteries of their lives—these are the archetypal dramas to which Frankenstein bears an obvious kinship. Yet, as one reads, as Frankenstein and his despised shadow-self engage in one after another of the novel's many dialogues, it begins to seem as if the nineteen-year-old author is discovering these archetypal elements for the first time. Frankenstein "is" a demonic parody (or extension) of Milton's God; he "is" Prometheus plasticator, the creator of mankind; but at the same time, by his own account, he is totally unable to control the behavior of his demon (variously called "monster," "fiend," "wretch," but necessarily lacking a name). Surprisingly, it is not by way of the priggish and "self-devoted" young scientist that Mary Shelley discovers the great power of her narrative but by way of the misshapen demon, with whom most readers identify: "My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic. What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?" It is not simply the case that the demon—like Satan and Adam in Paradise Lost—has the most compelling speeches in the novel and is far wiser and magnanimous than his creator: he is also the means by which a transcendent love—a romantically unrequited love—is expressed. Surely one of the secrets of Frankenstein, which helps to account for its abiding appeal, is the demon's patient, unquestioning, utterly faithful, and utterly human love for his irresponsible creator.

When Frankenstein is tracking the demon into the Arctic regions, for instance, it is clearly the demon who is helping him in his search, and even leaving food for him; but Frankenstein is so blind—in fact so comically blind—he believes that "spirits" are responsible. "Yet still a spirit of good followed and directed my steps, and, when I most murmured, would suddenly extricate me from seemingly insurmountable difficulties. Sometimes, when nature, overcome by hunger, sunk under the exhaustion, a repast was prepared for me in the desert, that restored and inspirited me. . . . I may not doubt that it was set there by the spirits that I had invoked to aid me."

By degrees, with the progression of the fable's unlikely plot, the inhuman creation becomes increasingly human while his creator becomes increasingly inhuman, frozen in a posture of rigorous denial. (He is blameless of any wrongdoing in terms of the demon and even dares to tell Walton, literally with his dying breath, that another scientist might succeed where he had failed!—the lesson of the "Frankenstein monster" is revealed as totally lost on Frankenstein himself.) The demon is (sub)human consciousness-in-the-making, naturally, benevolent as Milton's Satan is not, and received with horror and contempt solely because of his physical appearance. He is sired without a mother in defiance of nature, but he is in one sense an infant—a comically monstrous eight-foot baby—whose progenitor rejects him immediately after creating him, in one of the most curious (and dreamlike) scenes in the novel:

"How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom, with such infinite pains and care, I had endeavored to form? I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardor that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time traversing my bed-chamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep."

Here follows the nightmare vision of Frankenstein's bride-to-be, Elizabeth, as a form of his dead mother, with "grave-worms crawling" in her shroud; and shortly afterward the "wretch" himself appears at Frankenstein's
bed, drawing away the canopy as Mary Shelley had imagined. But Frankenstein is so cowardly he runs away again; and this time the demon is indeed abandoned, to reappear only after the first of the "murders" of Frankenstein's kin. On the surface, Frankenstein's behavior is preposterous, even idiotic, for he seems blind to the fact that is apparent to any reader—that he has loosed a fearful power into the world, whether it strikes his eye as aesthetically pleasing or not, and he must take responsibility for it. Except, of course, he does not. For, as he keeps telling himself, he is blameless of any wrongdoing apart from the act of creation itself. The emotions he catalogs for us—gloom, sorrow, misery, despair—are conventionally Romantic attitudes, mere luxuries in a context that requires action and not simply response.

By contrast the demon is all activity, all yearning, all hope. His love for his maker is unrequited and seems incapable of making any impression upon Frankenstein; yet the demon never gives it up, even when he sounds most threatening: "Beware," says the demon midway in the novel, "for I am fearless, and therefore powerful. I will watch with the wiliness of a snake, that I may sting with its venom. Man, you shall repent of the injuries you inflict." His voice is very like his creator's—indeed, everyone in Frankenstein sounds alike—but his posture is always one of simple need: he requires love in order to become less monstrous, but, as he is a monster, love is denied him; and the man responsible for this comically tragic state of affairs says repeatedly that he is not to blame. Frankenstein's typical response to the situation is: "I felt as if I had committed some great crime, the consciousness of which haunted me. I was guiltless, but I had indeed drawn a horrible curse upon my head, as mortal as that of crime." But if Frankenstein is not to blame for the various deaths that occur, who is? Had he endowed his creation, as God endowed Adam in Milton's epic, with free will? Or is the demon psychologically his creature, committing the forbidden acts Frankenstein wants committed?—so long as Frankenstein himself remains "guiltless."

It is a measure of the subtlety of this moral parable that the demon strikes so many archetypal chords and suggests so many variant readings. He recapitulates in truncated form the history of consciousness of his race (learning to speak, react, write, etc., by closely watching the De Lacye family); he is an abandoned child, a parentless orphan; he takes on the voices of Adam, Satan ("Evil thenceforth became my good," he says, as Milton's fallen angel says, "Evil be thou my good"), even our "first mother," Eve. When the demon terrifies himself by seeing his reflection in a pool, and grasping at once the nature of his own deformity, he is surely not mirroring Narcissus, as some commentators have suggested, but Milton's Eve in her surprised discovery of her own beauty, in book 4 of Paradise Lost:

I thither went
With unexperienced thought, and laid me down
On the green bank, to look into the clear
Smooth Lake, that to me seemed another Sky.
As I bent down to look, just opposite,
A Shape within the watery gleam appeared
Bending to look on me: I started back,
It started back, but pleased I soon returned,
Pleased it returned as soon with answering looks
Of sympathy and love: there I had fixed
Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire [ll 455-66]

He is Shakespeare's Edmund, though unloved—a shadow figure more tragic, because more "conscious," than the hero he represents. Most suggestively, he has become by the novel's melodramatic conclusion a form of Christ: sinned against by all humankind, yet fundamentally blameless, and yet quite willing to die as a sacrifice. He speaks of his death as a "consummation"; he is going to burn himself on a funeral pyre somewhere in the Arctic wastes—unlikely, certainly, but a fitting end to a life conceived by way of lightning and electricity:
"But soon," he cried with sad and solemn enthusiasm, "I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in peace, or, if it thinks, it will not surely think thus."

But the demon does not die within the confines of the novel, so perhaps he has not died after all. He is, in the end, a "modern" species of shadow or Doppelganger—the nightmare that is deliberately created by man's ingenuity and not a mere supernatural being or fairy-tale remnant.


Essays and Criticism: The Noble Savage in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

The estimate of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein familiar to us from literary handbooks and popular impression emphasizes its macabre and pseudo-scientific sensationalism: properly enough, so far as either its primary conception or realized qualities are concerned. But it has the effect of obscuring from notice certain secondary aspects of the work which did, after all, figure in its history and weigh with its contemporary audience, and which must, therefore, be taken into consideration before either the book or the young mind that composed it has been properly assayed. One such minor strain, not too well recognised in criticism, is a thin vein of social speculation: a stereotyped, irrelevant, and apparently automatic repetition of the lessons of that school of liberal thought which was then termed "philosophical".

In the work of Godwin's daughter and Shelley's bride, some reflection of contemporary social radicalism—crude, second-hand, very earnest, already a little out of date—occurs almost as a matter of course; what deserves comment is just that this element entered the author's notion of her plot so late and remained so decidedly an alien in it; for it governs the story only temporarily and, so to speak, extraneously, and confuses as much as it promotes the development of the character of the central figure, the monster itself. Where one might have expected, from Mary's character, that it would prove a main motif of the narrative, it is actually both detrimental thereto and ill-assimilated, and must be discarded altogether before the story can advance to its principal effect.

For, throughout a considerable part of the book—roughly speaking, the first half of the middle section, beginning with chapter xi—the monster is so far from being the moral horror he presently becomes that it is hardly credible he should ever be guilty of wanton brutality at all. (The transformation, by the way, is effected most abruptly, without even the degree of psychological consistency appropriate to fantasy; two violent rebuffs and an astonishingly rigid logicality of temperament turn the monster from his lonely and contemplative benevolence to a course of harsh, melodramatic vengefulness.) Rather, in the solitary student of Volney, musing on the pageant of human history, or on the contrast between man's accomplishments and his failures—"Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous and magnificent, yet so vicious and base?"—it is not hard to recognise that gentle layfigure of late eighteenth century social criticism, the "natural man," bringing his innocence into forceful and oversimplified contrast with the complexities and contradictions of our civilisation. Or, more precisely, may we not see in him (because of his strange origin and untutored state) something approximating to that variation of the general "child of nature" pattern to which Professor Fairchild has attached the name of Noble Savage? Like the savage, the monster approaches our society as an outsider, tests it by natural impulse and unsophisticated reason, and responds to it with a mixture of bewilderment and dismay.
Now, this aspect of the monster's character is basically unnecessary to the horror-plot; he need not pass by this road to ferocity and misery. (There might, for instance, as easily have been an original moral flaw in his constitution, paralleling the physical one; he might, as in the vulgar imagination, have been created bestial.) Indeed, the more this phase of his development is dwelt upon, the less consistent with the later stages does it appear. Nor is his experience as a Noble Savage too closely integrated into the story; it is connected rather arbitrarily to his education in language, but the social reflections, as well as the narrative which is their more immediate occasion, are pure interpolation, and lead to nothing. This is a real flaw in the story, felt by the reader as expectation disappointed; the author fails to make use of all her speculative preparation. When, for instance, the monster is hurt—brutally attacked—by those he trusted, it is because of their human ignorance and natural terror, not society's injustice; so that his radical observations are irrelevant to his own fate. Before long, indeed, the author is able to forget that the monster was ever a "natural man" (and consequently gentle and just by inclination) at all, without apparent loss to the dramatic values of the story. Everything points to the whole idea's having been an afterthought, arising, perhaps, before the full detail of the book had been worked out, but well after the general mood and drift and structure of the plot had been decided. The chance for it was offered by the story, and Mary Shelley could not decline it, but it was not an essential part of her idea, and could only be fitted in as a disproportioned and almost pointless interpolation.

The temptation seems to have been offered by the problem of the monster's intellectual development. The effort to make her creature psychologically credible must have troubled Mrs. Shelley most in his early days. What the difficulty was appears as one writes of it; how is one to speak of the "youth," the "childhood," of a being that appeared upon the earth full-grown, and yet how else is one to speak of his period of elementary ignorance and basic learning? The author cannot allow him the normal protracted human infancy and gradual education, for the plot demands that he escape from his creator and fend for himself at once; yet both plot and probability demand that he escape unformed, that he be confused and ignorant in the world into which he has blundered. As a result, the author bestows upon him a curious apprenticeship (to call it that), an amalgam of two quite different rates of development— for he is at the same time both child and man, and learns alternately like each. Thus he can walk and clothe himself from the moment of his creation, yet, infant-like, has trouble for a long while in separating the effects of the various senses; he learns the use of fire (by strict inductive reasoning!) in a few minutes, yet it is years before he can teach himself to speak or read. For the most part, however, his story is that of an adult in the state of nature, with faculties full-grown but almost literally without experience, and therefore making the acquaintance of the most primitive social facts by toilsome and unguided individual endeavour. If one distinguishes the difficulties (possible to an adult) of ignorance from those (peculiar to a child) of incapacity, there is really only a single effort to make him behave like one new-born—the confusion of the senses; thereafter he is a full-grown and decidedly intelligent but extraordinarily inexperienced man.

Now this comes close to being a description of the Noble Savage: an adult, but an alien to our world. If at this point (that is, chapters xi through xv) he differs markedly from the average of the type, it is only in being not an average but an extreme; the actual savage has his own commendable if elementary civilisation that he can compare with ours, but Frankenstein's monster has only the impulses of his nature—which are, to start with, absolutely good. But this mixture of innocence with ignorance was the very point to be exhibited by the Noble Savage or the "natural man"—"man as he is not"—both forms familiar to tediousness in the literature upon which early nineteenth century ingenuous radicalism fed its mind. So that, having brought her monster, untutored and uncorrupted, into the wilderness, there to spy upon and so study civilised ways (all of which was demanded anyhow by the plot), Mrs. Shelley would have found it hard not to fall into what must have been a very familiar habit of thought. She must surely have recognised that she was straying from the plotted path, whether she identified the new influence or not; but she was trying to write a full-length novel on the basis of a rather slim idea, and in those days interpolation was not yet a sin. So, not deliberately and yet not unwillingly, she permitted the assimilation of her story and her creature into the well-worn patterns they had skirted; none the less gratefully, perhaps, because they gave the young rebel an opportunity to utter a little of what was seething in her environment—the Shelley atmosphere, crossed by Byron's sulphureous trail—and in
her own eager mind.

But if the temptation was strong enough to attract her into a rather long and somewhat incongruous philosophical digression, it was still subsidiary to her initial impulse. If Godwin's daughter could not help philosophising, Shelley's wife knew also the eerie charms of the morbid, the occult, the scientifically bizarre. Her first purpose, which was melodrama, stood. Therefore the alien figure appears in the novel only momentarily—so long as; with a little effort, the plot accommodates itself to him; when he really threatens to interfere with it, he is abandoned. But if he never dominates the story, he does figure in it, and should be reckoned with. However relentlessly the first lurid vision is finally pursued to its end, the familiar lineaments of the Noble Savage, the child of nature, did come for a little while to be visible in Frankenstein's impious creation; however sharply his hideous features and terrible career may have distinguished him from the brooding islander or haughty Indian sachem, the central theme, the un congeniality of our actual world with a certain ideal and touchingly beautiful simplicity, served to associate his history, in some degree, with theirs, and so attract him temporarily into their form.


Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

Introduction

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

The following entry presents criticism of Shelley's novel Frankenstein (1818). See also, Mathilda Criticism.

When Mary Shelley wrote of Victor Frankenstein and his monster, she brought to life a story that would fascinate audiences through the ensuing centuries. Although the story seems "classic" to readers and movie-goers at the end of the twentieth century, Shelley's novel was something of an anomaly when she published it anonymously in 1818. The genre of science fiction did not yet exist, and novels themselves were often looked upon as "light" reading that did not rank with serious literature. In the twentieth century, however, Frankenstein has gained recognition as a pioneering effort in the development of the novel and as a progenitor of science fiction.

Biographical Information

Frankenstein was Shelley's first major literary production, completed when she was not yet twenty. Her life up to that point had been shaped by the presence of powerful intellectual figures: her father, political philosopher and novelist William Godwin; her mother, one of the earliest advocates of women's rights, Mary Wollstonecraft; and her husband, Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Mary grew up without a formal education—a situation typical for girls in her era—but with the formidable training of her parents' writings and the many classics available to her in her father's library. Because Wollstonecraft had died ten days after Mary's birth, Godwin raised her and her half-sister alone at first, then with a stepmother who apparently cared very little for the two girls. Mary escaped her home life in July 1814, when she eloped with Percy Shelley, who deserted his wife in order to be with her. With little money at their disposal, the pair travelled the continent, living primarily in Switzerland, Germany, and Italy. At the time Mary began writing Frankenstein in 1816, the couple's financial difficulties were exacerbated by personal loss: there were suicides in both of their families, and three of their children died in infancy. The one child who would survive was born in 1819, just three years before Percy Shelley drowned in Italy.
After her husband's death, Shelley struggled to support herself and her son, Percy Florence, often writing in order to earn money. A small stipend from Percy Shelley's father, Sir Timothy, brought with it some financial security, but also the condition that Shelley not publish under her married name. Consequently, her five novels and other publications all appeared anonymously. Sir Timothy increased the allowance again in 1840, enabling Shelley and Percy to live with a greater degree of comfort. Shelley died in 1851, after several years of illness.

**Plot and Major Characters**

Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* as a series of framing narratives: one narrator's story told within the framework of another narrator's story. The events described by the creature (which Shelley composed first) appear within Victor Frankenstein's narrative, which in turn appears in a letter written by Captain Robert Walton—an explorer who met Frankenstein in the North Pole—to his sister. Consequently, the reader's experience begins at the end of the drama, when Frankenstein and his monster have removed themselves from human society and are pursuing each other in perpetuity across the tundra. Walton then relates Frankenstein's story, which returns to his childhood, when Victor developed his initial interest in science. Some years later, Victor's planned departure for University is delayed when his mother dies; Frankenstein's interest in science simultaneously turns to the possibility of reanimating the dead. Working in comparative isolation at the University, Frankenstein pursues his obsession until he succeeds—bringing to life a pieced-together body. He immediately flees his creation in horror.

Entirely isolated, fully grown but without any guidance in its social and intellectual development, the creature makes its own way in the world; his story, told in the first-person as related to Victor some time later, occupies the center of the novel. The reader witnesses the gradual degradation of what began as an apparently good and loving nature. Because the creature's monstrous appearance inspires horror wherever he encounters humans, his potential for goodness falters, especially when Frankenstein fails to supply him with the companionship of a mate. Turning vindictive, the creature sets out to recreate for Victor the isolation of his own circumstances, gradually killing the members of his family, including Elizabeth, the beloved adopted sister who has just become Victor's wife. The two characters finish "wedded" to one another, or to the need to destroy one another, in the emptiness of the arctic tundra.

**Major Themes**

The issue that occupies *Frankenstein* most prevalently and explicitly is that of creation, manifested in a variety of forms. Shelley signalled the significance of this to her reader from the start with her subtitle and her epigraph: the one referring to the classical myth of Prometheus, and the other, taken from Book Ten of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, referring to the Genesis story: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me Man? Did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?" (*Paradise Lost* X, 11.743-45). The three characters invoked by these allusions—Prometheus, Lucifer, and Adam—share a history of rebellion, of a desire to "steal" some of the godly fire of life or knowledge for themselves. Shelley reflects the many layers of this mythology in her own rendering with the temptation and power Frankenstein finds in knowledge, as well as the danger that surfaces once it becomes apparent that he has either misused his knowledge or overstepped his bounds in acquiring it.

With the rise of feminist and psychoanalytic literary criticism late in the twentieth century, another aspect of the creation theme surfaced: reproduction. Viewed in this light, Frankenstein has usurped the prerogative of creation not from god, but from woman, and has thus tampered with the laws of nature and social organization. Generally, this approach to the novel critiques traditional gender roles and the bourgeois family as depicted in *Frankenstein*. The novel abounds in depictions of different familial relationships, particularly when read in light of Shelley's family history: woman's relationship to childbirth, daughter's relationship to mother, daughter's relationship to father. Fundamental to the novel's two main characters, despite the extreme
differences in family relationships, are the stories of their intellectual and emotional development, which resonate deeply within the era in which Shelley wrote. The nature of the human individual, the nature of that individual's development, the basic issue of inherent goodness or evil, concerned many artists and thinkers of the Romantic age.

Critical Reception

*Frankenstein* immediately became popular upon its publication, when it fit neatly into the current fashion for the Gothic novel, a genre abounding in mystery and murder. It would be some time before critics would look at Shelley's novel—or any novel—as a serious work of literature; initial critical attention often reduced *Frankenstein* to an aside to the work of her husband and the other Romantic poets. The first significant shift in critical reception occurred in the middle of the twentieth century, when major critics like Harold Bloom and M. A. Goldberg took it up with enthusiasm, exploring its Promethean and Miltonic echoes. Readers generally understood the novel as an evocation of the modern condition: man trapped in a godless world in which science and ethics have gone awry.

While most *Frankenstein* criticism has stressed the importance of Shelley's biography as a reflection upon the work, the approach has been central to psychoanalytic and feminist critics. The latter led a resurgence in Shelley criticism in the early 1980s, discovering in her work not only one of the earliest literary productions by a woman author, but also a source of rich commentary on gender roles and female experience at the beginning of the nineteenth century. At first, the biographical emphasis tended to reduce Shelley's creative and intellectual achievement to an effect of postpartum depression, experienced when she lost one of her babies immediately after giving birth. Later critics explored more and more aspects of Shelley's familial relationships, often considering her novel as a reflection of complex oedipal conflicts, or finding in her an early and rich feminist voice.

**Criticism: Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (essay date 1831)**


*[When a third edition of Frankenstein was produced in 1831, Shelley wrote a new introduction, reprinted below with James Rieger's notes. Shelley briefly recounts her biography, with an emphasis on her intellectual development and the events that led to the "waking dream" in which she first envisioned Victor Frankenstein and his creature.]*

The Publishers of the Standard Novels,¹ in selecting *Frankenstein* for one of their series, expressed a wish that I should furnish them with some account of the origin of the story. I am the more willing to comply, because I shall thus give a general answer to the question, so very frequently asked me—"How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea?" It is true that I am very averse to bringing myself forward in print; but as my account will only appear as an appendage to a former production, and as it will be confined to such topics as have connection with my authorship alone, I can scarcely accuse myself of a personal intrusion.

It is not singular that, as the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity, I should very early in life have thought of writing. As a child I scribbled; and my favourite pastime, during the hours given me for recreation, was to "write stories." Still I had a dearer pleasure than this, which was the formation of castles in the air—the indulging in walking dreams—the following up trains of thought, which had for their subject the formation of a succession of imaginary incidents. My dreams were at once more fantastic and agreeable than my writings. In the latter I was a close imitator—rather doing as others had done, than putting down the
suggestions of my own mind. What I wrote was intended at least for one other eye—my childhood's companion and friend; but my dreams were all my own; I accounted for them to nobody; they were my refuge when annoyed—my dearest pleasure when free.

I lived principally in the country as a girl, and passed a considerable time in Scotland. I made occasional visits to the more picturesque parts; but my habitual residence was on the blank and dreary northern shores of the Tay, near Dundee. Blank and dreary on retrospection I call them; they were not so to me then. They were the eyry of freedom, and the pleasant region where unheeded I could commune with the creatures of my fancy. I wrote then—but in a most common-place style. It was beneath the trees of the grounds belonging to our house, or on the bleak sides of the woodless mountains near, that my true compositions, the airy flights of my imagination, were born and fostered. I did not make myself the heroine of my tales. Life appeared to me too common-place an affair as regarded myself. I could not figure to myself that romantic woes or wonderful events would ever be my lot; but I was not confined to my own identity, and I could people the hours with creations far more interesting to me at that age, than my own sensations.

After this my life became busier, and reality stood in place of fiction. My husband, however, was from the first, very anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage, and enrol myself on the page of fame. He was for ever inciting me to obtain literary reputation, which even on my own part I cared for then, though since I have become infinitely indifferent to it. At this time he desired that I should write, not so much with the idea that I could produce any thing worthy of notice, but that he might himself judge how far I possessed the promise of better things hereafter. Still I did nothing. Travelling, and the cares of a family, occupied my time; and study, in the way of reading, or improving my ideas in communication with his far more cultivated mind, was all of literary employment that engaged my attention.

In the summer of 1816, we visited Switzerland, and became the neighbours of Lord Byron. At first we spent our pleasant hours on the lake, or wandering on its shores; and Lord Byron, who was writing the third canto of Childe Harold, was the only one among us who put his thoughts upon paper. These, as he brought them successively to us, clothed in all the light and harmony of poetry, seemed to stamp as divine the glories of heaven and earth, whose influences we partook with him.

But it proved a wet, ungenial summer, and incessant rain often confined us for days to the house. Some volumes of ghost stories, translated from the German into French, fell into our hands. There was the History of the Inconstant Lover, who, when he thought to clasp the bride to whom he had pledged his vows, found himself in the arms of the pale ghost of her whom he had deserted. There was the tale of the sinful founder of his race, whose miserable doom it was to bestow the kiss of death on all the younger sons of his fated house, just when they reached the age of promise. His gigantic, shadowy form, clothed like the ghost in Hamlet, in complete armour, but with the beaver up, was seen at midnight, by the moon's fitful beams, to advance slowly along the gloomy avenue. The shape was lost beneath the shadow of the castle walls; but soon a gate swung back, a step was heard, the door of the chamber opened, and he advanced to the couch of the blooming youths, cradled in healthy sleep. Eternal sorrow sat upon his face as he bent down and kissed the forehead of the boys, who from that hour withered like flowers snapt upon the stalk. I have not seen these stories since then; but their incidents are as fresh in my mind as if I had read them yesterday.

"We will each write a ghost story," said Lord Byron; and his proposition was acceded to. There were four of us. The noble author began a tale, a fragment of which he printed at the end of his poem of Mazeppa. Shelley, more apt to embody ideas and sentiments in the radiance of brilliant imagery, and in the music of the most melodious verse that adorns our language, than to invent the machinery of a story, commenced one founded on the experiences of his early life. Poor Polidori had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady, who was so punished for peeping through a key-hole—what to see I forget—something very shocking and wrong of course; but when she was reduced to a worse condition than the renowned Tom of Coventry, he did not know what to do with her, and was obliged to despatch her to the tomb of the Capulets, the only place for
which she was fitted. The illustrious poets also, annoyed by the platitude of prose, speedily relinquished their uncongenial task.

I busied myself to think of a story,—a story to rival those which had excited us to this task. One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror—one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart. If I did not accomplish these things, my ghost story would be unworthy of its name. I thought and pondered—vainly. I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations. Have you thought of a story? I was asked each morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative.

Every thing must have a beginning, to speak in Sanchean phrase; and that beginning must be linked to something that went before. The Hindoos give the world an elephant to support it, but they make the elephant stand upon a tortoise. Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself. In all matters of discovery and invention, even of those that appertain to the imagination, we are continually reminded of the story of Columbus and his egg. Invention consists in the capacity of seizing on the capabilities of a subject, and in the power of moulding and fashioning ideas suggested to it.

Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these, various philosophical doctrines were discussed, and among others the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated. They talked of the experiments of Dr. Darwin, (I speak not of what the Doctor really did, or said that he did, but, as more to my purpose, of what was then spoken of as having been done by him,) who preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion. Not thus, after all, would life be given. Perhaps a corpse would be re-animated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth.

Night waned upon this talk, and even the witching hour had gone by, before we retired to rest. When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision,—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handywork, horror-stricken. He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade; that this thing, which had received such imperfect animation, would subside into dead matter; and he might sleep in the belief that the silence of the grave would quench for ever the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life. He sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes.

I opened mine in terror. The idea so possessed my mind, that a thrill of fear ran through me, and I wished to exchange the ghastly image of my fancy for the realities around. I see them still; the very room, the dark parquet, the closed shutters, with the moonlight struggling through, and the sense I had that the glassy lake and white high Alps were beyond. I could not so easily get rid of my hideous phantom; still it haunted me. I must try to think of something else. I recurred to my ghost story,—my tiresome unlucky ghost story! O! if I could only contrive one which would frighten my reader as I myself had been frightened that night!
Swift as light and as cheering was the idea that broke in upon me. "I have found it! What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow." On the morrow I announced that I had thought of a story. I began that day with the words, It was on a dreary night of November, making only a transcript of the grim terrors of my waking dream.

At first I thought but of a few pages—of a short tale; but Shelley urged me to develope the idea at greater length. I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling, to my husband, and yet but for his incitement, it would never have taken the form in which it was presented to the world. From this declaration I must except the preface. As far as I can recollect, it was entirely written by him.

And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper. I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days, when death and grief were but words, which found no true echo in my heart. Its several pages speak of many a walk, many a drive, and many a conversation, when I was not alone; and my companion was one who, in this world, I shall never see more. But this is for myself; my readers have nothing to do with these associations.

I will add but one word as to the alterations I have made. They are principally those of style. I have changed no portion of the story, nor introduced any new ideas or circumstances. I have mended the language where it was so bald as to interfere with the interest of the narrative; and these changes occur almost exclusively in the beginning of the first volume. Throughout they are entirely confined to such parts as are mere adjuncts to the story, leaving the core and substance of it untouched.

M.W.S. London, October 15, 1831.

Notes

1 Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley (London).

2 Isabel Baxter (later Mrs. David Booth), the daughter of W. T. Baxter of Dundee. . .

4 "La Morte Fiancée."

5 "Les Portraits de Famille." Despite her assertion that these stories remain "fresh in my mind," Mrs. Shelley does not recall them accurately.

6 There were five of them, if one includes Claire Clairmont. In his Preface (p. 7) Shelley omits both Claire and Polidori.

7 "Peeping Tom," who watched the ride of Lady Godiva, was struck blind.

8 There is no evidence that Polidori ever planned such a story. In the Introduction to his realistic Ernestus Berchtold; or, The Modern Oedipus (1819), he claims that the "tale here presented to the public is the one I began at Coligny, when Frankenstein was planned, and when a noble author having determined to descend from his lofty range, gave up a few hours to a tale of terror, and wrote the fragment published at the end of Mazeppa."

9 Shelley may not have attempted "the platitude of prose" at all. The following doggerel fragment, editorially dated 1816, may be part or all of his contribution to the contest:
A shovel of his ashes took
From the hearth's obscurest nook,
Muttering mysteries as she went.
Helen and Henry knew that Granny
Was as much afraid of Ghosts as any,
And so they followed hard—
But Helen clung to her brother's arm,
And her own spasm made her shake.

10 It is unlikely that it took Mary Shelley all this time "to think of a story." Byron seems to have proposed the contest on 16 June, when Polidori was laid up with a sprained ankle and the Shelley party slept overnight at Villa Diodati. They would not ordinarily have done so, for their own house was a few minutes' walk away. Shelley's Preface recalls cold, rainy evenings when "we crowded around a blazing wood fire," but the sixteenth seems to have been the only day on which, in Mary's words, "incessant rain . . . confined us . . . to the house." In any case, Polidori noted in his Diary for 17 June: "The ghost-stories are begun by all but me." This date is independently supported by that on Byron's "A Fragment" . . .

11 An allusion to the political theory of Sancho Panza, the commonsensical squire in Cervantes' Don Quixote de la Mancha (II.xxxiii).

12 Polidori's Diary for 15 June records a conversation between himself and Shelley "about principles,—whether man was to be thought merely an instrument." This is almost certainly the discussion Mary Shelley recalls as "many." Polidori had just published his thesis on the psychosomatic aspects of sleepwalking (Disputatio Medica Inauguralis, Quaedam de Morbo, Oneirodynia Dicto, Complectens [Edinburgh, 1815]). He was therefore far more expert than Byron was on such questions as the discovery and communication of "the principle of life." The conversation apparently took place the day before Byron suggested the story contest, not, as recollected here, some time afterwards. . . .

13 Galvanism—here, the application of electricity to dead tissue—had given spectacular "token of such things" in 1803, when Galvani's nephew, Giovanni Aldini (1762-1834), induced spasms in "the body of a malefactor executed at Newgate." Cf. Byron, Don Juan, I (1819), 1034: "And galvanism has set some corpses grinning . . .".

14 Shelley contributed more than his widow recalls here. . . .

15 Another misstatement of fact. . . .

Criticism: U. C. Knoepflmacher (essay date 1979)


[In the essay that follows, Knoepflmacher contends that "Frankenstein is a novel of omnipresent fathers and absent mothers," a situation he relates explicitly to Shelley's own family history and the repressed anger at her father that appears to surface in the novel.]

Parental affection, indeed, in many minds, is but a pretext to tyrannize where it can be done with impunity.
—Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

I will keep a good look out—William is all alive—and my appearance no longer doubtful—you, I daresay, will perceive the difference. What a fine thing it is to be a man!

—Mary Wollstonecraft to William Godwin, 10 June 1797

There never can be perfect equality between father and child . . . the ordinary resource is for him to proclaim his wishes and commands in a way sometimes sententious and authoritative and occasionally to utter his censures with seriousness and emphasis. . . . I am not, therefore, a perfect judge of Mary's character. . . . [She] shows great need to be roused.

—William Godwin to William Baxter, 8 June 1812

I learned from your papers that you were my father, my creator; and to whom could I apply with more fitness than to him who had given me life?

—Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818)

On the first page of *Frankenstein*, beneath the title and subtitle, appears a three-line quotation from *Paradise Lost*, X.743-45: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me Man, did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?" The following page contains an inscription that seems far more tame and submissive: "To WILLIAM GODWIN Author of Political Justice, Caleb Williams, &c. / These Volumes / Are respectfully inscribed / By / The Author."

**Major Media Adaptations: Motion Pictures**


Major Media Adaptations: Television


The bitterness of Milton's Adam is intensified in Frankenstein by the companionless Monster: "I remembered Adam's supplication to his Creator; but where was mine? he had abandoned me, and, in the bitterness of my heart, I cursed him." Though recognizing "Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition," the Monster also seems to remember Adam's fit of rebellion in Book Ten of Paradise Lost when it sarcasstically reproaches its own indifferent maker: "Oh truly, I am grateful to thee my Creator for the gift of life, which was but pain" (p. 115). In the speech from which Mary Shelley takes her novel's epigraph, Adam revolts against that same Spirit of Creation earlier described "brooding on the vast Abyss" and making "it pregnant" (I.20-22). When Adam considers that he can only increase and multiply his own progeny's "curses," Eve invites him to abjure creation, to remain the first and last Man. In Mary Shelley's revenge story, the Adamic Monster who has turned into a Satan forces its neglectful father-creator to experience its own desolation; in Milton's paternal universe, however, the rebellious child Adam must be forced to accept his own role as parent, even if parenthood does convert him into a death-bringer, the father of Cain and Abel. Adam's revolt is short-lived. To deny God's design would be tantamount to submission to a far more terrifying "Universe of death" and to a banishment into the Satanic abode of "many a frozen Alp"—so like the ice-scapes into which the Monster lures its creator—a region where "all life dies, death lives, and Nature breeds / Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things / Abominable, inutterable, and worse, / Than Fables yet have feign'd, or fear conceiv'd, / Gorgons or Hydras, and Chimeras dire" (II.622, 624-28).

If the three lines quoted on the title page of Frankenstein thus evoke a locus for the "anger and hatred" that so irreconcilably separate the Monster from its father and creator, the novel's dedication seems to stem from quite opposite an intention. The "Author," who so "respectfully" aligns herself with that other "Author" she will not publicy address as her father, assumes a stance that is as dutiful and self-effacing as that adopted by the exemplary Elizabeth Lavenza, the orphan whom Alphonse Frankenstein cherishes as "his more than daughter, whom he doated on with all the affection a man feels, who, in the decline of life, having few affections, clings more earnestly to those that remain" (pp. 195-96). In her 1831 introduction to the revised version of Frankenstein, Mary Shelley speaks of herself "as the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity." Her 1818 dedication, however, pays tribute only to the father who had been her mentor in the decline of his life; it ignores the famous mother whose conflicts with a tyrannical father had helped shape her first published work, a pamphlet entitled Thoughts on the Education of Daughters. Had Mary Shelley forgotten the rebellious mother who had written that "respect for parents is, generally speaking, a much more debasing principle" than marriage and who had insisted that the "father who is blindly obeyed is obeyed from sheer weakness, or from motives that degrade the human character"?

Before I attempt to answer that question, let me point out that the quotation from Paradise Lost and the dedication to Godwin have a connection that is so obvious that it can easily be missed. In each passage, a father is addressed by the offspring he has "moulded." And, what is more important, in each passage the father addressed is that offspring's only parent. Like Adam, and like the Monster who calls himself "an abortion to be spurned at" (Walton's last letter, p. 219), Mary Shelley never knew a mother's nurture.
Frankenstein is a novel of omnipresent fathers and absent mothers. It is no coincidence that after killing the child who boasts of his powerful "papa," the Monster should stop to gaze at "the portrait of a most lovely woman" and be momentarily calmed by her maternal beauty, only to remember angrily and ruefully that "I was for ever deprived of the delights that such beautiful creatures could bestow" (p. 139). Nor is it a coincidence, I think, that the Monster's previous "rage of anger," the "kind of insanity in my spirits" that leads him to burn down the De Lacy cottage and to seek "redress," is the direct result of his realization that he will never be accepted as a member of the family of "the old man"—the blind father whose hand he had seized in his unsuccessful plea for affection and kinship (pp. 134-35, 136).

Frankenstein resurrects and rearranges an adolescent's conflicting emotions about her relation both to the dead mother she idealized and mourned and to the living, "sententious and authoritative" father-philosopher she admired and deeply resented for his imperfect attempts at "moulding" Mary Wollstonecraft's two daughters. Fanny "Godwin" emulated the mother who had twice attempted to commit suicide. Her hardier half-sister attempted to master guilt and hostility in the "voyage of discovery" begun by Walton the mariner. As she tries to explain in her 1831 introduction—written after she had completed Valperga, The Last Man, Perkin Warbeck, and nearly a dozen short stories—Frankenstein is unique among her productions. It differs from her other works because in it she refused to "exchange the ghastly image of my fancy for the realities around" (p. 228). The adolescent mother and wife could confront "frightful" fantasies—destructive and aggressive thoughts—which the matured professional writer still entertained, yet carefully defused and disguised in most of her subsequent fictions.

Critics have inevitably ventured into biographical speculations in their attempts to come to terms with Frankenstein. In the preceding essay in this collection, Ellen Moers demonstrates the significance for this novel of the death of Mary Shelley's first (unnamed) "female child" in 1815, of the birth of the son she named after her father in 1816, and of the death by suicide, later in that same year and when Frankenstein was well under way, of Mary's half-sister Fanny, whom Godwin had described in 1812 as possessing "a quiet, modest, unshowy disposition," quite the reverse of his own daughter's "singularly bold, somewhat imperious" manner. Like Professor Moers, I tend to read Frankenstein as a "phantasmagoria of the nursery," a fantasy designed to relieve deep personal anxieties over birth and death and identity. Yet I prefer to stress the importance of an earlier nursery—of the nurture denied to Mary herself when her mother died of a retained placenta eleven days after her birth and of the highly inadequate substitute for a nursery which she found in her remarried father's household.

Since in my reading of Frankenstein William Godwin may appear almost a villain, it ought to be acknowledged that he was genuinely solicitous about the care and welfare of Mary Wollstonecraft's two daughters. (Indeed, his very solicitude contributed to Mary Shelley's conflicting emotions of allegiance and resentment; had he been more like her maternal grandfather, Edward John Wollstonecraft, a drunkard and a bully, Mary might have found it easier to emulate her mother's rebellious detachment.) Godwin himself had been "brought up in great tenderness" as a child. Just as, in a passage added to elaborate on Victor Frankenstein's happy youth, Victor describes "the ardent affection that attached me to my excellent parents" (p. 31), so did Godwin gratefully remember his own parents. He claimed that his mother had "exercised a mysterious protection over me" and yet, significantly, he never could bring himself to forgive her for sending him away from home while an infant "to be nourished by a hireling." This personal understanding of the need for mothering must have been decisive in Godwin's stubborn quest for a second wife to act as surrogate mother for the two orphans in his care. Still, as every biographer has pointed out, Mrs. Clairmont was hardly a Mary Wollstonecraft. Vulgar, mundane, preoccupied with the welfare of her own two children, she failed to establish a good relationship with her two stepdaughters. Rather than compensating Mary for her deprivation, as Godwin had intended, she actually helped activate in Mary a lifelong desire to compensate her father for the loss of his exquisite first wife and their short-lived marital happiness. The situation was hardly improved when, in 1803, before Mary's sixth birthday, the new Mrs. Godwin presented her husband with the son he had actually expected in 1797 when he and the pregnant Mary Wollstonecraft, strangely overconfident of the sex
of the child she was carrying, had repeatedly promised themselves a "little William" in their letters.5

Professor Moers hints that the Monster's wanton destruction of little William in the novel is an expression of a young mother's anxieties over the precarious health of her own baby William. The speculation is not entirely new. Back in 1928, Richard Church also thought he detected a "miserable delight in self-torture" and a prophetic "anticipation of disaster" in Mary Shelley's decision to depict the fictional murder of "that fair child" who bears the name of her actual son:

At the time that she was writing this book, the baby William was in the tenderest and most intimate stage of dependent infancy. The mite five months of age was passionately tended—but not very knowledgeably or hygienically—by both his parents. It is almost inconceivable that Mary could allow herself to introduce a baby boy in her book; deliberately call him William; describe him in terms identical with those in which she portrays her own child in one of her letters [in which she alludes to the real boy's identical blue eyes in similar rhapsodic terms]—and then let Frankenstein's monster waylay this innocent in a woodland dell and murder him by strangling.6

Church's clue is valid, as we shall see; but his surmise remains as incomplete as Muriel Spark's added suggestion that the murder of the boy who bears the name of "the child Mary loved more than any" is symptomatic of a split between feeling and intellect that led her "automatically" to identify the threatened child with her own threatened emotions.7

Church, Spark, and Moers are undoubtedly correct in linking the Monster's first murder to Mary Shelley's fears for her second child. Yet these fears, which proved so sadly justified when William died in 1819, also stemmed from deeper and more primal associations. For, in addition to her own son, there were two other "little Williams" who played a crucial role in the fantasy life of Mary Shelley's formative years. The first of these was none other than Mary herself, the little William expected in 1797 who turned into a little girl responsible for her mother's death and father's grief. The second was the half-brother born to Mary's stepmother, William Godwin the Younger, whose arrival she must have regarded as a threat to her relationship with a father to whom she so desperately wanted to make amends.

Even after the birth of this rival man-child, Mary eagerly tried to repair her father's loss both of the philosopher-wife he had worshipped and the philosopherson he had hoped for from his first union. In the same 1812 letter in which Godwin contrasts Mary's imperiousness to Fanny's passivity, he notes approvingly that, unlike her half-sister, his daughter had shown herself true to her parental stock by responding to his teachings: "Her desire for knowledge is great, and her perseverance in anything she undertakes almost invincible." It seems fairly obvious that this extreme eagerness to learn was related to Mary's even greater eagerness to please the father for whom she had, as she later would put it, from very early on entertained an "excessive and romantic passion." Still, her deep thirst for knowledge and her active identification with his own learning, so like the impulse that binds the Monster and Walton to the more deeply studied and "philosophical" Victor, seems to jar both with Mary's lifelong insistence on her ignorance, timidity, and "horror of pushing" and with Percy Shelley's self-justificatory, yet believable, description in "Epipsychidion" of an unresponsive and indifferent wife. Indeed, visitors who came to the Godwin home detected no real distinction between Mary and the torpid and unambitious Fanny; Coleridge, for instance, found "the cadaverous silence of Godwin's children quite catacombish."8

This discrepancy is crucial to Frankenstein and to Mary Shelley's self-divisions into aggressive and passive components, a raging Monster and a "yielding" Elizabeth. But the discrepancy itself is easy enough to reconcile. In 1838, two years after Godwin's death, Mary Shelley was finally able to voice her disappointment in the exacting father-tutor she had tried to please:
My Father, from age and domestic circumstances, could not "me faire valoir." My total friendlessness, my horror of pushing, and inability to put myself forward unless led, cherished, and supported—all this has sunk me in a state of loneliness no other human being ever before, I believe, endured—except Robinson Crusoe.9

It is clear from this account that Mary could, when "led, cherished, and supported," be the active and responsive, even "somewhat imperious," child described by Godwin in his 1812 letter; but like "Lucy," who lost her mother as an infant and whose case history is described in Erna Furman's A Child's Parent Dies: Studies in Childhood Bereavement, she could also resort to the defence of withdrawal and passivity whenever thwarted in this acute need for support.10

Mary Shelley's identification with the total isolation of Robinson Crusoe is significant. By 1838 she might have allowed another fictional analogue to characterize her sense of desertion. Yet the qualifying use of the adjective "human" prevents an identification with the Monster: the motherless creature who clings to the blind De Lacey to plead for affection and support is pointedly distinguished by its "un-human" features. What is more, the Monster is aggressive. As a male, albeit a male who wishes a female complement to subdue its "evil passions," it can find an outlet for hatred not permissible for nineteenth-century daughters. Fearful of releasing hostilities which—without a maternal model—she regarded (or wanted to regard) as exclusively male attributes, Mary Shelley could resort only to passivity as a safer mode of resistance. Again like "Lucy," Mary experienced a depressive crisis at the age of fifteen in the same year in which her father had hailed her "invincible" drive for knowledge. Noting that his "bold" daughter had suddenly become so listless that she showed "a great need to be roused," Godwin sent the teenager to the Baxter family in Scotland, where she observed a happy family nucleus for the first time in her life. Recalled from Scotland by her father two years later (is it sheer coincidence that Victor Frankenstein should destroy the female monster in the Hebrides?), she soon became reacquainted with Shelley, the anti-authoritarian son of Sir Timothy. It was during their honeymoon at Marslyus that Shelley, perhaps to help her weather the bitterness of her father's disapproval, encouraged Mary to write her first piece of fiction. The title of that story, now lost, was "Hate."11

Yet, unlike Shelley the iconoclast, she was not cast for the role of rebel. Even her elopement could not be construed as an act of open defiance. The poet, after all, had presented himself as her father's eager disciple, as one who would—and could—put into practice the principles of the "inestimable book on 'Political Justice.'" It is not too fanciful therefore to suppose that the young girl who pledged her love to Shelley over her mother's grave at St. Pancras Churchyard hoped to revive or resurrect the short-lived union between her own parents. Shelley had been betrayed, Mary was willing to believe, into a marriage with one inferior and unsympathetic to his genius. Had she not seen her father debased by just such a union with her stepmother? She would nobly rescue Shelley from her father's fate, and, in the process, repair the damage done by her own birth. Through her, the "little William" her parents had expected could be born again, and, by giving it the nurture she had herself lacked as a child, she would be able to assume her dead mother's identity and role. Yet the child once again was a female, and again the bond between mother and daughter was short-lived; after recording her successful nursing of the baby for three consecutive days, Mary Shelley laconically wrote: "Find my baby dead. Send for Hogg. Talk. A miserable day. In the evening read 'Fall of the Jesuits.' Hogg sleeps here."12 The unemotional, seemingly indifferent tone of this and subsequent entries (the next one ends: "Not in good spirits. Hogg goes at 11. A fuss. To bed at 3") is broken when she records her dream, on 19 March 1815, "that my little baby came to life again; that it only had been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived."13

As Professor Moers observes, this dream is linked to the fantasy of animation that underlies Frankenstein; yet it could hardly have been Mary Shelley's first wishful "dream" of making the dead come alive. Before, a child had wished to restore a mother; now, a mother wished to restore a child. The restoration again became a possibility after the birth of a male "babe" in January of 1816.14 By naming her first male child after her father, Mary could signify the reparation she had so long intended. The offering was as deferential as the
dedication of her first literary offspring to the "Author" of *Political Justice*, of *Caleb Williams*, and of herself. But, like that dedication, it was also double-edged.

By 1816, the surrogate life with Shelley had already been sorely tested. No "little William" could breach the sense of loneliness and desertion she once more intensely experienced. Not only her father, but also her father's substitute, had been found wanting. The integration that she, like the Monster, had yearned to find through a mate who might take the place of a rejecting father seemed impossible. Although she clung tenaciously to her second child, the rebelliousness and self-pity she had previously stifled began to surface. Like the Malthusian Adam of Book Ten who resents his own birth and decides to resist his Father by not procreating, she resented her role as perpetrator of a male line.

The 1831 introduction makes much of the "hideous" thoughts that went into the making of *Frankenstein*. As if to deny that these thoughts germinated within her, Mary Shelley overemphasizes her passivity, the defense to which she had previously resorted to her father's (and to Shelley's) chagrin. She insists that she had no control over her revenge story: "My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me." If this tactic recalls Coleridge's own distancings from an "unhallowed" and possibly demonic imagination, it also strongly resembles both Victor Frankenstein's trance-like activities and the Monster's repeated claim that its vengeful crimes are solely attributable to the neglect of, and contempt for, all its eager efforts to please.

At least in the early stages of its growth and education in the ways of "man" (Mary Shelley deliberately seems to eschew the words "humanity" or "mankind") the Monster is a most willing student. Not only does it quickly master the lessons intended for Safie (whose name means "wisdom"), but it is eager to please the De Laceys by anonymously performing the most menial tasks. Like a child who reveres grownups, it looks upon the family "as superior beings, who would be the arbiters of my future destiny." The Monster fantasizes "that it might be in my power to restore happiness to these deserving people," particularly to "the venerable blind father" whose losses have been greater than his children's (p. 103). De Lacey first wins the Monster's "reverence" by the soul-stirring music of his violin. Significantly, the ugly Monster and the beautiful Agatha respond identically to the "sweet mournful air." Indeed, when the Monster later kneels at De Lacey's feet, it hopes to win the same recognition earlier accorded to De Lacey's kneeling daughter:

He played a sweet mournful air, which I perceived drew tears from the eyes of his amiable companion, of which the old man took no notice, until she sobbed audibly; he then pronounced a few sounds and the fair creature, leaving her work, knelt at his feet. He raised her, and smiled with such kindness and affection, that I felt sensations of a peculiar and overpowering nature. ... I withdrew from the window, unable to bear these emotions [Pp. 103-4]

*Frankenstein* clearly draws on Mary Shelley's recollection of her vain attempts to win "notice" and approval as her father's pupil. (Indeed, after her elopement she remained most interested in the "conduct" of the second "little William" being "moulded" in her father's house.) In her 1831 introduction she depicts herself as "a devout but nearly silent listener" to Byron's and Shelley's discourses on "the principle of life." She deliberately belittles both her "tiresome unlucky ghost story" and her ideas, which, she says, required "communication with [Percy's] far more cultivated mind." But the belittlement can hardly conceal her ready appropriation of the subject discussed by the two poets and "poor Polidori." Their conversation about the piece of flesh that twitched "with voluntary motion" may well have evoked, in her mind, the piece of flesh that caused her mother's death. But it was clearly their speculation that perhaps a "corpse would be reanimated" that attracted and repelled her so powerfully.

Mary could not acknowledge to her 1831 English readers that the topic which the three men had so casually touched upon was integral to a private fantasy she had by 1816 long cherished and recently despaired of—the fantasy of restitution that would reconcile the apparently antagonistic aims of resurrecting a mother and
regaining a father's undivided love. In the 1831 introduction it is Shelley, and not his wife, who soon starts a story "founded on the experiences of his early life." Although Mary Shelley dwells on her own early life in Scotland (an "eyry of freedom" in which she was "not confined to my own identity"), she ostensibly dwells on this past only to suggest her subsequent acquisition of a greater sense of "reality." The wife of a husband "anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage" thus wants above all to stress her maturation. She has outgrown "the indulging of waking dreams" and must apologize for the "so very hideous" production of a "young girl." Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the introduction should depict her Scottish fantasy life as wholly "pleasant" and thus in no way connected to the "ghastly image" that overwhelmed her in 1816 when forbidden and ugly material had, like the Monster itself, come to life.

That "hideous progeny," Mary Shelley insists in 1831, is her very own. Though she acknowledges Shelley's "incitement," she stresses her originality with unaccustomed forcefulness: "I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling, to my husband" (p. 229; italics added). Indeed, there is a faint note of resentment at the two "illustrious poets" who, "annoyed by the platitude of prose, speedily relinquished their uncongenial task" (p. 225). The seed they have so carelessly implanted in Mary (and "poor Polidori") becomes a burden that is hers alone. It is she who has to give birth to a "hideous progeny," because she can better understand the pains of abandonment. Like the Monster, the author has been deserted. And, if we are to trust her account, she began her story neither with Walton's frame or Victor's account of his idyllic youth, but with the scene of desertion in chapter 4, with a father who rejects the stretched-out hand ("seemingly to detain me, but I escaped") of the "miserable monster whom I had created" (p. 53). Victor's repulsion of "the demoniacal corpse I had so miserably given life" will unleash antagonistic emotions that Mary Shelley had resisted and would stoutly continue to resist.

Yet the Monster does not become truly demoniacal until it murders little William and thereby causes the death of the guiltless Justine. As it explains to its creator, "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend." Unlike the "fallen angel" he professes to have become, the Monster insists that evil need not be its good: "Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous" (p. 95). The words recall another male demonist created by a female imagination, Emily Bronte's Heathcliff, who asks Nelly to "make me good." Yet Mary Shelley was far less willing than her Victorian successors to acknowledge her attraction to the anarchic and the destructive. Her violent figures are inevitably males; she could not have depicted a Jane Eyre who bloodies a boy's nose or a Maggie Tulliver who mutilates her dolls. And, whereas Emily Bronte quickly passes over the particulars of Heathcliff's early deprivation, Mary Shelley lingers over the Monster's painful degradation before she will depict it as an enraged murderer and fiend.

By the time the Monster does strangle little William our sympathies have so fully shifted from Frankenstein to the Monster that the action almost seems justifiable. Like little William, the Monster has been an innocent more sinned against than sinning. Though no "darling of a pigmy size," it is a genuine Wordsworthian child who has been able to "wander at liberty" and to derive intense "pleasure" in the natural world. It is as delighted by "the bright moon" and "the little winged animals" (p. 98) as any Romantic child of a feminine Nature.17 But unlike Wordsworth's asocial children, this grown-up child desires socialization, human contact. On observing the De Laceys, who are exiled from society and yet remain self-sufficient as a family unit, the Monster discovers that its "heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures" (p. 127). It is from them that it—like the Mary Shelley who observed the Baxter family—learns the rudiments of kinship:

The youth and his companion had each of them several names, but the old man had only one, which was father. The girl was called sister, or Agatha; and the youth Felix, brother, or son. I cannot describe the delight I felt when I learned the ideas appropriated to each of these sounds, and was able to pronounce them. I distinguished several other words, without being able as yet to understand or apply them; such as good, clearest, unhappy. [Pp. 107-8]

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The absence of a "mother" in this paragraph (which ends on the word "unhappy")! is conspicuous. Less apparent, I think, is the strange fact that Agatha is called "sister" but never "daughter," even though "brother" Felix, who will tear away the old man with the single name of "father," is accorded the name of "son."

It is its own exclusion from such a system of relations that later leads the Monster to maintain that both the killing of little William and the execution of the innocent Justine have been a warranted retaliation, the outcome of "the lessons of Felix, and the sanguinary laws of man" (p. 140). Felix had removed his father from the Monster's reach after mistaking its Agatha-like feelings for the contrary emotions of hatred and violence. That the creature should still so vividly remember this potential brother's action after the deaths of William and Justine seems rather poignant. For, in its way, the murder of William was a delayed fratricidal act.

After it has burned the De Lacey cottage the Monster manages to reassert its softer nature. On entering "a deep wood," it blesses the sun and "dared to be happy." But its "hatred" for its "unfeeling, heartless creator" is soon reactivated when it is accidentally cast in a life-giving role like that of its own deserted father. Just as Victor had animated the corpse from which he created the Monster, so the Monster tries "to restore animation" to a young girl it has rescued from drowning. But again a gesture of kinship is rewarded with a wound—a literal injury this time—from the "ball" shot by "the man" who, like Felix, misreads an expression of the benevolent side of the Monster's divided personality as an act of aggression. Unlike a Mary Shelley who desperately clung to her Agatha- or Elizabeth-self, the Monster now yields to its destructive impulses and vows "eternal hatred and vengeance."

Yet the Monster wavers still one more time when it sees, not an adult male rival, but a "beautiful child, who came running into the recess I had chosen with all the sportiveness of infancy" (p. 138). The vague syntax almost seems designed to confuse us momentarily—does "the sportiveness of infancy" refer to little William or to the Monster? Assuming "this little creature" to be as "yet unprejudiced," the larger creature is "seized" by the idea to "seize him, and educate him as my companion and friend." The child, however, displays Victor's own adult horror: "monster! ugly wretch! you wish to eat me, and tear me to pieces—You are an ogre—Let me go, or I will tell my papa" (p. 139). Significantly, the scene both reverses and matches the earlier encounter with Felix: whereas the threatened little boy invokes his father to protect him, Felix tried to protect his own father from the Monster's threat. In both cases, however, this threat is only imaginary: just as the Monster has revoked its vows of "eternal hatred" on seeing the harmless child, it had earlier "refrained" from strangling Felix. But when little William utters the name of his father, the oath of revenge is remembered. Assuming that "M. Frankenstein" and his own creator are one and the same, the Monster has found its "first victim": "Frankenstein! you belong then to my enemy" (p. 139). The murder is a delayed act of revenge, not only against a father but also against a father's rival son, like Felix a brother-figure. A huge and alienated Cain kills an Abel who can be sure of his father's support and secure in that father's identity.

If, as Church was the first to suggest, the fictional little William were no more than an analogue for Mary Shelley's real-life "baby boy," then the sympathetic, almost exculpating, attention devoted to all the psychic wounds inflicted on the Monster before it commits the murder would be distracting and illogical, as well as inartistic. The Monster's first choice of "victim" derives its fitness as much from the unattainability of a father as from fraternal slights. Little William possesses the birthright the Monster longs for. Only a course of aggression can obtain for the Monster the parental recognition it desires. And that course will prove irreversible—despite the Monster's pleas for a restraining female counterpart. It will also prove self-destructive.

_Frankenstein_ is a fiction designed to resist that potential self-destruction. The destruction of little William can obviously be related to Mary Shelley's own muted hostility toward her younger half-brother; unlike herself, the younger William Godwin possessed a mother and, as a male, had received his father's identity and approbation. Simultaneously, however, the Monster's murder of the little boy must also be recognized as a self-mutilation which the novel as a whole tries to resist and conquer. Just as Mary Shelley must have feared
that the possible death of her own little William might damage her identity, so does the death of the fictional boy mark the irreparable loss of the "benevolent" or feminine component of the Monster's personality, making it indistinguishable from Victor Frankenstein, similarly alienated from his feminine self—a self represented both by his dead mother and by the wife who dies on his wedding night.

I have said that *Frankenstein* is a novel of fathers and absent mothers, and it is time to examine this statement more closely. The book's central relationship is obviously that between father and child. After his mother's death, the secluded Frankenstein pursues feminine Nature "to her hiding places" to appropriate for himself the maternal role and the blessings of a new "species" created without a mother's agency: "No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs" (p. 49). After the destruction of its female complement ("a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself), the Monster becomes father to the man and relentlessly imposes on its creator the same conditions of dependency and insecurity that it was made to suffer. Once able to identify with Agatha, the daughter, and to respond so powerfully to the "benevolent divinity" of little William's and Victor's mother, the Monster culminates its revenge by depriving Victor of Elizabeth. This contest between males divorced from female nurturance is framed by a series of forbidding fathers—the father whose "dying injunction" forbade Walton to embark on a sea-faring life; Henry Clerval's father, who insists that his son be a merchant rather than a poet; the "inexorable" Russian father who tries to force his daughter into a union she abhors; the treacherous Turkish father who uses Safie to obtain his freedom yet issues the "tyrannical mandate" that she betray Felix.

There are kinder fathers in the novel, to be sure, but their kindness is tainted: as Kate Ellis shows on pp. 129-130 below, the "proud and unbending disposition" of Beaufort leads him to seek an exile that results in his loyal daughter's total degradation; the "Italian gentleman" who is Elizabeth's father in the 1818 version (in 1831 she is the daughter of an imprisoned patriot and a German lady who "had died on giving her birth") decides, on remarrying, that it would be preferable to have her educated by her uncle and aunt rather than have her "brought up by a step-mother"—a decision that, in reversing William Godwin's own choice, may be construed as an act of kindness, but nonetheless involves an abdication of parental responsibility. De Lacey and Alphonse Frankenstein are impaired by an impotence and lack of discrimination that Mary must often have regretted in a father who "from age and domestic circumstances could not 'me faire valoir.'" De Lacey can welcome Safie as a daughter but cannot respond to the Monster's need for affection; Alphonse Frankenstein values Elizabeth as a replica of Caroline Beaufort yet cannot believe in the innocence of Justine Moritz. A rationalist, like Godwin, the elder Frankenstein rather cruelly chastens his son's youthful imagination; his disparagement of Cornelius Agrippa actually may have produced, according to Victor, "the fatal impulse that led to my ruin" (p. 33). The 1818 version of the novel is even harsher on the old man whose heart is finally broken by Elizabeth's death. In a contradiction which Mary Shelley emended in her 1831 revisions, Alphonse is also blamed for leading his son to science when he conducts a Franklin-like experiment and draws some electrical "fluid" down from the clouds (p. 35). The Monster's confusion of Alphonse with Victor, when he encounters William, thus seems quite warranted. When, after Clerval's murder, the calm but "severe" magistrate, Mr. Kirwin, informs Victor that a "friend" has come to visit him, the prisoner believes that the visitor is the Monster: "I know not by what chain of thought the idea presented itself that the murderer had come to mock me at my misery." Surprised, Mr. Kirwin rejoins: "I should have thought, young man, that the presence of your father would have been welcome, instead of inspiring such violent repugnance" (p. 177). To the reader, however, the "chain of thought" seems quite intelligible: Alphonse, Victor, and the Monster have all become manifestations of the same truncated male psyche.

*Frankenstein* questions the patriarchal system (see Kate Ellis on this, pp. 135-136), yet the novel is more than an indictment of fathers as potential monster-makers. If in his parental neglectfulness Victor resembles William Godwin (as well as Percy Shelley), his obsessive "desire for knowledge" and "perseverance" are the very same qualities displayed by the younger Mary Shelley when she wanted to signify her oneness with her father. The novel's attack on a male's usurpation of the role of mother therefore goes beyond a daughter's accusation of a father who could not "me faire valoir." It is also an expression of Mary Shelley's deep fears.
about an imbalance within herself—the imbalance of a personality that had developed one-sidedly, without a feminine or maternal model. Karen Horney points out that a "girl may turn away altogether from the female role and take refuge in a fictitious masculinity" in order to assuage "disappointments in the father" or "guilt feelings towards the mother." It seems obvious that the young woman who addresses the readers of *Frankenstein* (including the "Author" to whom the book is dedicated) through three male speakers acquired such an attitude in her own childhood. Yet *Frankenstein* represents a desperate attempt to recover "the female role." Despite its use of male masks and its emphasis on male aggression, the novel tries to exorcise a sadistic masculinity and to regain the female component of the novelist's threatened psyche.

Just as the novel oscillates in its sympathies between Victor and the increasingly demonic monster, so does it oscillate in the sexual characterization of these two antagonists. At first, though nurtured by loving women, Frankenstein is phallic and aggressive, capable of torturing "the living animal to animate the lifeless clay" (p. 49). Conversely, the Monster—purposely not called a "he" in this discussion—initially displays feminine qualities. It identifies with both Agatha and Safie and is respectful of that same Wordsworthian and feminine Nature whose "recesses" its creator is so eager to "penetrate" (p. 42). These sexual associations, however, shift with the Monster's first act of aggression, the "mischief that leads it to plant the portrait of maternal "divine benignity" into one "of the folds of [Justine's] dress" (p. 140). The Monster now assumes Victor's phallic aggression; and Victor becomes as tremulous and "timid as a love-sick girl" (p. 51).

Victor's desire to marry Elizabeth is presented as a pathetic and hopeless attempt to reenter the broken circle of affection over which his dead mother had presided. Conversely, the Monster's similar yearning for a female companion is treated as highly dangerous. Victor's marriage to Elizabeth evokes the image of a debilitated patient in need of a nurse (an image corroborated in James Whale's film *The Bride of Frankenstein*, which implies that the newly wed "Henry" Frankenstein is far too frail to consummate his marriage to the voluptuous Elizabeth). The Monster's desire for a mate, however, raises the specter of "a race of devils" to be "propagated on the earth" (p. 163). Even an unconsummated union holds dangers: Victor fears that the female monster might "turn with disgust from [the Monster] to the superior beauty of man" or that the Monster's own aggression (so far limited to the murder of William and the death of Justine) might be exacerbated upon his beholding his own "deformity" in "female form" (p. 163).

But above all Victor fears the possibility of a female creature not only more aggressive than the novel's remarkably passive female characters, but also capable of surpassing the sadistic and "unparalleled barbarity" of the killer of little William: "she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness" (p. 163; italics added). The implications are clear. Victor seems to acknowledge that the Monster's aggression has been partly justified, but a female who might delight in sadism "for its own sake" is a horror he cannot contemplate. Mary Shelley may well intend to have her readers see the speciousness in Victor's rationalizations—his decision is made when he "had not sufficient light" for his "employment." Still, Victor's terror seems also to be Mary Shelley's. The specter of female sadism is resisted by the novelist who fears her own aroused anger and desire for revenge. Victor rejects the Monster when he destroys the half-formed shape of its female companion; Mary Shelley, too, distances herself from the demonic figure at the casement, whose "ghastly grin" proclaims the retaliations that will follow: the deaths of Clerval, Alphonse Frankenstein, and Elizabeth. Only after the death of Victor will the Monster turn its aggression on itself. In a parody of the self-sacrificing Son, the feminine principle of compassion in *Paradise Lost* who balances the exacting justice of God the Father, the Monster will immolate itself to save humanity from its own violence.

The only surviving male speaker of the novel, Walton, possesses what the Monster lacks and Frankenstein denies, an internalized female complementary principle. Walton begins his account through self-justificatory letters to a female ego-ideal, his sister Margaret Saville (the British pronunciation of her name sounds like "civil"). The memory of this civilizing and restraining woman, a mother with "lovely children," helps him resist Frankenstein's destructive (and self-destructive) course. Frankenstein and the Monster are the joint
murderers of little William, Justine, Clerval, Alphonse Frankenstein, and Elizabeth; Walton, however, refuses to bring death to his crew. In a skillful addition to the 1831 version, Mary Shelley has Walton remind his sister that a "youth passed in solitude" was offset by "my best years spent under your gentle and feminine tutelage."

Mary Shelley, who likened her own "state of loneliness" to that of Robinson Crusoe, lacked the "feminine tutelage" that rescues Walton. Bereft of a maternal model that could teach her how to acknowledge and channel her own aggression, fearful of the unleashed aggression that consumes both Victor and the Monster, she turned to passivity as a stabilizing force. In her story "The Sisters of Albano" (published in *Keepsake* for 1829), the young nun Maria sacrifices herself for her more passionate sister Anina (who then becomes herself a nun). In *Frankenstein* the falsely accused Justine Moritz meets her degradation and death with "an air of cheerfulness"—in total contrast to the Monster's rage at the injustices it is forced to suffer (p. 84). In "The Sisters," Anina, "her only wish to find repose in the grave," delays this death-wish (so like both Fanny Imlay's and that of Richardson's Clarissa) until the death of her own "miserable father," whose loss she tries to repair through constant "filial attentions";21 in *Frankenstein*, Justine can die peacefully since she, "the favourite of her father" until the day of his death, has no such amends to make (p. 60).

This equation of femininity with a passivity that borders on the ultimate passivity of death is, in *Frankenstein* and in Mary Shelley's own life, associated with a dead mother. Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein, who nurses her dying father "with the greatest tenderness" and is the perfect daughter-wife to Alphonse Frankenstein, is a model accepted by Justine and by Elizabeth yet rejected (or forgotten) by the Monster and by Victor. Caroline is found by the elder Frankenstein near her father's coffin; on her own deathbed, she enjoins the "yielding" Elizabeth to take her place as mother and "supply my place to your younger cousins" (p. 38). It is significant that both she and Elizabeth are invoked in Victor's dream just after he has seen "the dull yellow eyes of the creature" to which he has given life. Presumably one of Victor's objects in finding "a passage to life" is to restore his mother and "renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption" (p. 49); but his dream only underscores his rejection of the maternal or female model.

In the dream, Victor embraces Elizabeth, about whom he had said that she and he "were strangers to any disunion and dispute" (p. 30); when Elizabeth turns into the "corpse of my dead mother" (p. 53) the startled dreamer awakes and beholds "the miserable monster whom I had created." The conjunction of dream and reality, both equally frightening to Victor, forces us to link the four personages, the two females and the two males. The relation between Caroline and Elizabeth is one of fusion: although Elizabeth, like Mary Shelley, is the accidental agent of the mother's death, the "amiable woman"22 harbors no resentment and insists that Elizabeth take her place. The relation between Victor and the two female corpses and the relation between Victor and the Monster are both based on "disunion"; his reaction is identical in each case: he recoils from the association.

But what is the relation between the two female corpses and the Monster? Like the Elizabeth of the 1831 version, the Monster is an orphan; like the young woman whose single remonstrance in the entire novel is her regret "that she had not the same opportunities of enlarging her experience, and cultivating her understanding" (p. 151) as her male friends, the Monster is denied a formal education. It is customary by now to discuss Frankenstein and the Monster as the feuding halves of a single personality. Yet the beautiful and passive Elizabeth and the repulsive, aggressive Monster who will be her murderer are also doubles—doubles who are in conflict only because of Victor's rejection of the femininity that was so essential to the happiness of his "domestic circle" and to the balance of his own psyche.23

Victor's dream, then, can be read as an intrapsychic conflict that has its roots in Mary Shelley's deprivation of a maternal model. Though Frankenstein is the dreamer, it is Caroline, Elizabeth, and Monster who dramatize this conflict. The Elizabeth whose mother died on giving her birth in the 1831 version and whose father deserted her in the 1818 version can find a feminine model in Caroline, and inherit her place. The motherless
Monster deserted by its father finds this model in the picture of Caroline, only to be triggered by it into a course of revenge that ends with Elizabeth's death. Victor's dream thus contains an ominous warning. Though male, ugly, and deformed, the Monster is a potential Elizabeth (indeed, what if Frankenstein had created a little Galatea instead of a heroic male of Brobdingnagian proportions?). Yet Victor fails to recover the feminine ideal of nurture represented by Caroline, that sentimentalization of a forgiving Mary Wollstonecraft. By rejecting his child as a Monster, he will also be responsible for the death of Elizabeth, that less monstrous, yet also unduly passive, component of Mary Shelley's personality.

Death remains the only reconciler in Frankenstein, as the dream of Elizabeth's corpse and the reality of the corpse turned Monster foreshadow. For not only Victor and the Monster, but also the Monster and Elizabeth fuse through death into a single personality. Like Keats and Percy Shelley, but for rather different reasons, Mary Shelley was half in love with easeful death. The demise of Caroline so early in the novel suggests that Mary Shelley could endorse this escape from a world of fathers, brothers, husbands, and male justices and identify it with the repose found by her own mother.24 There is strong empathy, too, with the grief the Monster feels as it hangs "over the coffin" of its dead parent, a scene that parallels Caroline Beaufort's own grief by her father's coffin. The Monster's lament ("Oh, Frankenstein! generous and self-devoted being! what does it avail that I now ask thee to pardon me?") may seem out of character, as Walton rather self-righteously points out, but Walton of course fails to understand that the Monster has also recovered that softer, feminine side that enabled it before to identify with Agatha and Safie. Indeed, as we shall see in the next section, the very phrasing of the Monster's tribute to Victor resembles the speeches of penitent daughters in Mathilda and "The Mourner."

The conclusion of Frankenstein exorcises aggression. With the death of Victor, the Monster turns its hatred against itself. "You hate me" it tells Walton, "but your abhorrence cannot equal that with which I regard myself (p. 219). These words echo the expression of Mary Shelley's own revulsion, in her 1831 introduction, over the "hideous" embodiment of anger she had allowed herself to create. The Monster now sees justice in destroying its own "miserable frame"; its sadism has turned into self-pity: "I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on." Sadism becomes masochism, the outlet for self-inflicted anger: "Polluted by crimes, and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest but in death?" (p. 220). Rest rather than restitution. The Monster must welcome the death so eagerly embraced by many of Mary Shelley's female penitents, figures often far more guiltless than it has been.

One such figure is that other victim of "injustice," the ironically named Justine Moritz. Mary Shelley asks us to regard the revengeful Monster and the passive Justine who is falsely accused of the murder of little William as exact opposites. Yet are they? If the child's murder can be construed as a fratricidal act on the part of the Monster, why are we told shortly before the murder that Madame Moritz has accused poor Justine of "having caused the deaths of her brothers and sisters"? (p. 61). The accusation is as false as the later indictment: it comes from one who—like Mrs. Clairmont in the Godwin household—clearly prefers the other children to this Cinderella and "neglected daughter." But why is the detail inserted? We must trust the novel rather than the novelist, and the suggestion that Justine may harbor thoughts as aggressive as the Monster's is corroborated by her willingness to confess to the murder. "Threatened and menaced" by her father confessor, charged "with the blackest ingratitude" for killing the child of the woman who had adopted her, Justine tells Elizabeth that she "almost began to think that I was the monster that he said I was" (p. 82). And so she dies for the Monster's crime. She is an innocent—and yet so is the Monster. She is its associate: her passive death becomes almost as much a retaliation against injustice as its murderous passion. She can also cause pain: her self-deprecating speeches are as agonizing to Victor as the Monster's later accusations. And Elizabeth, by identifying with Justine's death-wish ("I wish," cried she, "that I were to die with you; I cannot live in this world of misery" [p. 84]), also manages, ever so sweetly, to sharpen Victor's guilt and pain over William's death. Passivity, used correctly, as Mary Shelley knew but could not admit, can be as powerful a weapon as rage.
Novels, as we all know, are relations based on relations: narratives based on the interconnection of characters as well as on the links between these characters and their creator. In a famous illustration in *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray drew his own mournful and timid face peering out behind the removed mask of laughing jester; in a celebrated passage in *Middlemarch*, George Eliot, who had privately claimed that Casaubon was based on no other "original" but herself, rejected the notion that Dorothea's mummified husband ought to be regarded as a heartless monster: "some ancient Greek," the narrator volunteers, must have "observed that behind the big mask and the speaking-trumpet, there must always be our poor little eyes peeping as usual and our timorous lips more or less under anxious control." In *Frankenstein*, too, the lifting of a monstrous mask produces a startling unveiling: beneath the contorted visage of Frankenstein's creature lurks a timorous yet determined female face.

The unveiling should not really surprise us. For *relatio*, as Percy Bysshe Shelley seemed to remember in his distinction between poetry and logic, once simply meant evocation: the recalling or bringing back of forgotten or dormant associations that the conscious will must then rearrange and recombine. The fluidity of relations in *Frankenstein*, which converts each character into another's double and makes a male Monster not only a counterpart of Victor and Walton but also of little William, Agatha, Safie, Caroline, Justine, and Elizabeth, stems from common denominators that can be traced back, as I have tried to show, to Mary Shelley's childhood and to her threatened identity as an adult daughter, wife, and mother. Yet this fluidity of relations, which makes *Frankenstein* so powerful as an exploration of the very act of kinship and relation, is absent in the novelist's later fictions, even though these later works are equally obsessed with the same intrapsychic conflicts. The later Mary Shelley, who suffered severe new shocks through the deaths of her own William, her daughter Clara, and Shelley himself, seemed no longer capable of the imaginative strength that had enabled her to relate her own adolescent deprivations to the Monster's development and education. Whereas only a matured George Eliot, could, after much experimentation, have produced *Middlemarch*, maturity for Mary Shelley involved a loss of the powers she had been able to tap in her first novel. Her gradual acceptance of her father's deficiencies, her Amelia Sedley-like cult of the dead Shelley, and her devotion to little Percy Florence, permitted her to domesticate the daemon within and to advocate, in fiction as in life, the renunciatory virtues of an Elizabeth-Justine.

To be sure, there was one more important imaginative outburst and it came, not unexpectedly, after William died in Rome in June 1819. Mary had been able to bear the deaths of her first female child in 1815 and of the year-old Clara in 1818, but the loss of the little boy overwhelmed her as powerfully as the death of the fictional little William had unsettled Frankenstein. Life (or death) threatened to imitate art as the grieving mother indulged the same death-wish to which Justine had yielded. Writing to Amelia Curran three weeks after the burial, Mary Shelley asked to hear about the child's tomb, "near which I shall lie one day & care not—for my own sake—how soon—I shall never recover that blow—I feel it more now than at Rome—the thought never leaves me for a single moment—Everything has lost its interest to me." But again, life and creativity came to the rescue: she had been pregnant since March, and Percy Florence was born in November 1819; outraged by a new affront from her father and increasingly alienated from Shelley, she was "roused" once more into writing a fiction that might master these turbulent emotions, the novella *Mathilda*, on which she worked feverishly in August and September.

Shelley had written to Godwin to ask him to "soothe" Mary "on account of her terrible state of mind." Instead, the philosopher (who could not remember his grandson's age) wrote to berate Shelley and to ask for more money to help him fight a litigation. A second letter to Mary proved equally insensitive; instead of consolation for the loss of the boy she had named after Godwin, Mary found herself threatened once more with the withdrawal of her father's love: "Remember too," wrote Godwin, "though at first your nearest connections may pity you in this state, yet that when they see you fixed in selfishness and ill humor, . . . they will finally cease to love you, and scarcely learn to endure you." That this bullying accusation of selfishness was taken seriously by Mary Shelley is evident in *Mathilda*, her most autobiographical piece of fiction, the writing of which must have been almost as therapeutic as the birth, after its completion, of her new male child.
Unlike *Frankenstein*, with its three male narrators, *Mathilda* is told by a twenty-two-year-old woman (Mary Shelley's own age in 1819). And unlike Walton who successfully repels the death that consumes Victor and the Monster, this narrator is engulfed by death: in one version of the manuscript, she is a penitent soul in limbo who addresses herself to a female listener who (unlike Walton's sister) is also dead, possibly after committing suicide on suffering a "misfortune" in Rome that reduced her "to misery and despair." 28 Elizabeth Ritchie, the critic most extensively concerned with *Mathilda*, has stressed the biographical implications of the novella's second half in which the lonely Mathilda meets a deprived young poet called Woodville and tries to cajole him into a suicide pact (in the days before their elopement, it had been Shelley who suggested to Mary that they both commit suicide). Ritchie is undoubtedly correct when she reads this second half as a self-castigation on Mary's part for her estrangement from Shelley: "*Mathilda* expresses a sense of estrangement from, even of physical repulsion toward, one whom she had deeply loved, a realization of her own selfish, petulant, and unreasoning absorption in her grief." 29 But in the first half of the narrative Mathilda's guilt and grief are traced to their source in her relationship to her father.

Like Mary Shelley, Mathilda is the daughter of a beautiful, intelligent, and adored woman who dies a few days after Mathilda's birth; like Godwin, her father is crushed by his loss. Although, unlike Godwin, he does not remarry, he leaves his child in the care of a stern and unsympathetic foster mother and (like De Lacey) becomes an exile. Again like Mary Shelley—who in the 1831 preface to *Frankenstein* speaks of living "in the country as a girl" and of passing a "considerable time in Scotland"—Mathilda grows up in the Scottish countryside. Her sole "pleasures," like the Monster's, "arise from the contemplation of nature alone; I had no companion." 30 At this point Mary Shelley begins to invert the fictional parallels: whereas she was recalled from Scotland by her father, Mathilda's father visits her in Scotland when she is sixteen; whereas Mary found herself as neglected as before by Godwin after her return, Mathilda's father tries to compensate for his earlier desertion by lavishing attentions on his daughter; and, lastly, while Mary gave up her "excessive and romantic" attachment to Godwin when she eloped with Shelley, Mathilda discovers, to her horror, that her father's love for her is incestuous. After she repels him, he leaves her a letter in which he acknowledges that he had hoped to find in her a substitute for his beloved dead wife. She dreams that she pursues him to a high rock, and her dream (like *Frankenstein*'s) is prophetic: she finds her father's corpse in a cottage on a cliff. Guilt-stricken, she withdraws from society until she meets Woodville, himself a guilty mourner.

This melodramatic fable obviously displays in a different fashion the passive and aggressive impulses I have examined in *Frankenstein*. Mathilda's passive withdrawal clearly stems from parriidal wishes which the narrative conveys and yet never fully dares to acknowledge. Just as the Monster protests that it has not willed its crimes, so is Mathilda absolved from wishing her father's death—an event she dutifully tries to prevent. Why, then, should she feel such inordinate guilt over the death of the incestuous lecher who can love her only after she has become a fully developed woman? Though far less artistic than *Frankenstein*, the story must be read as a pendant to the novel, as still another self-exploration and confrontation with acknowledged hatred and wishful self-destruction; moreover, by dispensing with the protective masks of male protagonists, the story places Mary Shelley's marital difficulties at her father's doorstep.

How could Mary Shelley have had the temerity to send the manuscript of *Mathilda* to Godwin? She asked Maria Gisborne to take the manuscript to London, show it to her father, and obtain his advice about publishing it. When Maria demanded its return, Godwin held on; he told her that he did "not approve of the father's letter" in the story and that he found the entire subject "disgusting and detestable." 31 Had Mary Shelley finally succeeded in unsettling the revered "Author" of *Political Justice*? Was he finally forced to recognize what was so much more elliptically presented through Victor's rejection of the disgusting and detestable Monster? Godwin made sure that *Mathilda* would never be published. But when his daughter sent him *Valperga* to help him defray new debts and expenses, he gladly saw this new novel to press. Begun in 1820, yet not published until February of 1823, well after Shelley's death, *Valperga* had again anticipated an actual disaster, as Mary recognized: "it seems to me that in what I have written hitherto I have done nothing but prophecy [sic] what has [?] arrived to. Mathilda foretells even many small circumstances most truly—and
the whole of it is a monument of what now is." 32

What "now" was in 1823, however, was the death of Shelley and not the death of the father, who calmly wrote his daughter early that year that he had "taken great liberties with [Valperga], and I am afraid your amour propre will be proportionately shocked." 33 He need not have worried. The wife who had deferred to Percy's "far more cultivated mind" while composing Frankenstein did not resent her father's editorial tampering with Valperga. Yet the old conflicts could not be exorcised, and they would continue to surface in her fictions—particularly in her short stories.

In "Transformation" (1831), perhaps her best short story, a monster—this time a deformed Satanic dwarf—must be killed before an "imperious, haughty, timeless" young man, who has shown sadistic traits and whose thirst for revenge against his beloved's father leads him to exchange bodies with the monster, can win his Elizabeth-like bride: by mutilating himself on his enemy's huge sword while feebly plunging in his tiny dagger, Guido the rebel can regain his manly shape, marry the kind Juliet, and be henceforth known as "Guido il Cortese." If "Transformation" is a fantasy in which the aggression and monsterhood induced by two fathers—Guido's "generous and noble, but capricious and tyrannical" father and Juliet's "cold-hearted, cold-blooded father"—can be overcome, "The Mortal Immortal" (1834) reverses the emphasis. In this story, which George Eliot must have read before writing her own horror tale "The Lifted Veil" (1859), the alchemist's apprentice Winzy (another ironic name suggestive of the Pyrrhic victories of "Victor" and "Lavenza") becomes responsible for the death of Cornelius Agrippa (the youthful Frankenstein's own mentor) when he drinks the elixir of life the old master had prepared for himself; he thus not only becomes a parricide of sorts who is forced to see his "revered master" expire before his eyes, but also a passive victim of his own longevity as he watches the gradual deterioration of his beloved Bertha into a "mincing, simpering, jealous old" hag. Nursing her until her death "as a mother might a child," Winzy, like the Monster, seeks some place where he might end his life-in-death. 34

It is the tale called "The Mourner" (1830), however, which most pronouncedly allegorizes the self-division first manifested in Frankenstein. The story's narrative interest is itself split between a grief-stricken Mathilda-figure called Ellen (her real name turns out to be Clarice) and the Guido-like narrator Neville, a young man whose impetuosity is checked by Ellen much in the way that Walton is restrained by the feminine fosterage of his sister. Neville's rebellious feelings toward education and parental authority are carefully contrasted to Ellen-Clarice's feelings about her own dead father and tutor. At Eton Neville has only met "a capricious, unrelenting, cruel bondage, far beyond the measured despotism of Jamaica" (p. 87): his outrage and sense of "impotence" reach their apex when he is abused by a tutor. He rebels and, like the Monster, gives in to a "desire of vengeance." After the departure of the De Lacey's, the Monster is "unable to injure any thing human" and turns its "fury towards inanimate objects" (Frankenstein, p. 134); Neville too wants to leave a "substantial proof of my resentment," and, like Proust's Marcel who destroys the hat of Charlus, he tears his tutor's belongings to pieces, "stamped on them, crushed them with more than childish strength," finally dashing a "time-piece, on which my tyrant infinitely prided himself (Stories and Tales, p. 88). Neville flees to Ellen's cottage, sure that his violent outburst has forever alienated him from his father, but she persuades him that he will be forgiven.

Ellen-Clarice may be able to reclaim Horace Neville from exile and monsterhood, but she cannot overcome her own self-loathing as a female monster; her alienation can be conquered only through a withdrawal into death. Like so many of Mary Shelley's fictional orphans, Ellen-Clarice is the daughter of a widower who, after the "deadly blight" of his wife's death, leaves his surviving "infant daughter" to be reared by others (p. 96). He returns when Clarice is ten and devotes himself to her education. Their relationship, totally unlike that between Mathilda and her returning father, is ideal and she quickly becomes "proficient under his tutoring": "They rode—walked—read together. When a father is all that a father may be, the sentiments of filial piety, entire dependence, and perfect confidence being united, the love of the daughter is one of the deepest and strongest, as it is the purest passion of which our natures are capable" (p. 96). This wishful harmony between
parent and child is disrupted by an incident that links Clarice's passivity to Neville's aggression much as Justine-Elizabeth are linked to the Monster. During a raging storm, Clarice's father deposits her in a lifeboat in which there is room for but one more passenger. He dies, fighting the waves and battling "with the death that at last became the victor" (p. 100) and leaves Clarice haunted by the idea of "self-destruction." Neville's attempts to dispel her "intense melancholy" ("what do I not owe to you? I am your boy, your pupil") are fruitless. Unable to bear her guilt, sure that no young man would ever want "to wed the parri—," she wills her death (p. 106), joins her "father in the abode of spirits" (p. 105), and leaves Neville to tell her story to his own bride.

Mary Shelley's deep ambivalence about William Godwin informs most of her works of fiction. While thesis-novels such as The Last Man (1826) show the impress of her father's philosophical tutorship by incorporating some of his ideas on institutions and government, Frankenstein and tales like those discussed above reveal the impact of a very different legacy. The philosopher who had so strongly inveighed against "coercion" of any sort, who had written that all "individuals" ought to be left "to the progress of their own minds," clearly failed to apply his precepts during the early development of his daughter. His effect on her was as inhibiting as that which James Mill, another rationalist prescriber of felicity, was to have on the emotional life of his son.

When Godwin died in April 1836 at the age of eighty, Mary Shelley was at work on her last piece of fiction, Falkner (1837), a novel about remorse and redemption. The fact that she wrote no more novels or stories in the fifteen years after his death can be attributed to a variety of reasons, among them, no doubt, her greater financial independence. Still, the fact remains intriguing. Intriguing, too, is her decision to postpone the edition of Godwin's manuscripts and the composition of his biography. Like George Eliot's Casaubon, Godwin had left her a message ad_joining her not to allow his papers "to be consigned to oblivion." Yet, very much like the Dorothea Brooke who no longer could think that the "really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it," Mary Shelley now stoutly resisted the hold of the dead hand. She had once wanted "little William" to be recognized by her father. Now she could adduce her maternal solicitude for another boy as a foil to "the sense of duty towards my father," whose "passion for posthumous fame," so like Victor Frankenstein's eagerness to receive the blessings of future generations, she no longer professed to share: "With regard to my Father's life," she wrote Trelawny, "I certainly could not answer it to my conscience to give it up—I shall therefore do it—but I must wait. This year I have to fight my poor Percy's battle—to try to get him sent to College without further dilapidation of his ruined prospects." To see Percy Florence reinstated in the graces of Sir Timothy Shelley, that other forbidding father, had become more important than to make amends for guilty thoughts and feelings. Aggressive at last in a sanctioned way, she had become a militant mother rather than a daughter penitent for not being a son. Godwin had squelched the publication of Mathilda in 1820; when Mary Shelley died in 1851, the promised biography consisted of only a few manuscript pages, largely about Godwin's relation to Mary Wollstonecraft. "Little William" had been revenged at last.

Notes

1Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus, ed. James Rieger (Indianapolis and New York, 1974), chap. 7, p. 127. All future references in the text are to this edition of the 1818 version of the novel.


3 Quoted in C. Kegan Paul, William Godwin: His Friends and Contemporaries (London, 1876), II:214; the letter was written to an "unknown correspondent" who had inquired about Godwin's theories of education.

5See Godwin and Mary: Letters of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, ed. Ralph M. Wardle (Lawrence, Kansas, 1966), pp. 80, 82, 88, 92, 102; the passage used as the second epigraph to this essay ("William is alive") occurs on p. 94.

6Richard Church, Mary Shelley (London, 1928), pp. 54-55.


9Mary Shelley's Journal, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Norman, Oklahoma, 1947), p. 205; the entry occurs on 21 October 1838.


11For a fuller account of Mary's early life with Percy see Peter Dale Scott's discussion on pp. 178-183, below.

12Journal, p. 39; 6 March 1815.

13Ibid., p. 41; 19 March 1815.

14Mary Shelley's journal for May 1815-July 1816 is lost; since it would have contained entries about the first six months of her "little William's" life, it is possible that she herself destroyed it after the boy's death in 1819.

15Why had Mary Shelley called for Hogg immediately after the death of her first child? In her letter to Shelley of 27 July 1815 she pleads that he "attend to" and "comply with" her feeling that they "ought not to be absent any longer": "We have been now a long time separed [sic]" (The Letters of Mary Shelley, ed. Frederick L. Jones [Norman, Oklahoma, 1944], I:16-17).

16Journal, p. 15; 16 September 1814. As a male child, the younger William Godwin was permitted to go away to school: from 1811 to 1814 he went to the Charterhouse, from 1814 to 1818 to a school in Greenwich run by the younger Dr. Burney. Described as "wayward and restless" as a youth, he became a successful journalist and wrote a novel called Transfusion. He died of cholera at the age of twenty-nine, leaving a wife but no children (Mary's Percy Florence thus was William Godwin's only grandchild). In 1818, Godwin described his son as "the only person with whom I have been any way concerned in the course of education, who is distinguished from all others by the circumstance of always returning a just answer to the questions I proposed to him"; this habit of mind apparently seemed more important to Godwin than the boy's "very affectionate disposition" (Paul, William Godwin, II: 258). After his son's death, Godwin published the novel he had left behind and added, in Paul's words, a "gravely self-restrained Memoir" (II:321).

17Juliet Mitchell points out that in the conditions established by "patriarchal human history," the growing girl learns "that her subjugation to the law of the father entails her becoming the representative of 'nature'" ("A Woman's Place," Psychoanalysis and Feminism [New York, 1974], p. 405).

18Frankenstein describes himself as "passive" in the arrangements of his return to Geneva immediately after he has agreed to the Monster's dictates; when, "trembling with passion, [he tears] to pieces the thing on which I was engaged," the Monster soon forces him into passivity again (pp. 145, 164). By the time the two reach Walton's ship, the presumed aggressor, Victor, is clearly the victim of the Monster he thinks he is pursuing.
Inhibited Femininity," *Feminine Psychology* (New York, 1967), p. 79; see also, in the same volume, "The Flight from Womanhood": "the desire to be a man is generally admitted comparatively willingly and . . . once it is accepted, it is clung to tenaciously, the reason being the desire to avoid the realization of libidinal wishes and fantasies in connection with the father" (p. 66).

The contrast between the two figures, in fact, resembles that between "Man of Science" and poet developed by Wordsworth in his 1800 "Preface": the scientist "seeks truth" in "solitude," while the creative poet carries "everywhere with him relationship and love."


Mary Shelley seems to have had difficulties choosing the right adjective to describe the mother who is infected by Elizabeth; "amiable" was originally "admirable," but in the 1831 edition the novelist had apparently become less hesitant about identifying Caroline with her own mother: "this amiable woman" now becomes "this best of women."

In a way, it is Mel Brooks, in his script for the comic *Young Frankenstein*, who has been the most acute reader of the novel when he reunites the Monster, not with Victor, but with Elizabeth; Brooks also recognizes the novel's fluid interchanges when he has young Frahnkensteteen become endowed with the Monster's brain.

It may not be necessary to remind the reader that in both males and females the longing for death is associated with the longing for a reunion with the mother; in women, however, this death-wish seems to be free of the fears which lead men to paint a destructive *femme fatale* who brings death rather than life into the world.


*Mathilda*, ed. Elizabeth Nitchie (Chapel Hill, 1959), p. 90. The Bodleian notebook simplifies the implausibility of a dead narrator by having Mathilda write out her story just before her death. The fullest account of the bibliographical and biographical history of the manuscript is to be found in the third appendix of Elizabeth Nitchie's *Mary Shelley: Author of "Frankenstein"* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1953), pp. 211-17.


*Mathilda*, p. 10.


Mary Shelley to Maria Gisborne, 2-6 May 1823, *Letters*, I:224; by a coincidence, a stern portrait of Godwin faces the pages from which this passage is taken.


*Tales and Stories*, p. 161; future references to stories in this collection will be given in the text.
35A study of the ways in which *Frankenstein* and some of the other novels enlist, yet also subvert, Godwinian ideology is beyond the scope of this essay. Such an investigation, however, I am convinced, would yield fruitful results. It would show, for instance, that the Monster I have called a Wordsworthian child of Nature is also a Godwinian child whose freedom from social institutions paradoxically proves as injurious as Justine's degradation at the hands of the legal system, which Godwin pronounced to be "an institution of the most pernicious tendency" (*An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*, edited and abridged by Raymond A. Preston [New York, 1926], II:210). It would also show that in her rebellious moods Mary Shelley sided with the idea of Godwin's former disciple, T. R. Malthus, against her father, who, by 1818, was preparing his reply to the *Essay on Population*.

36*An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, II:27.

37*Middlemarch*, p. 8.


**Criticism: Kate Ellis (essay date 1979)**


*[In the essay that follows, Ellis reads *Frankenstein* alongside the paradigms of the bourgeois family—its idealized structure, its separation of public and private, and its division of social roles according to gender difference.]*

Nature has wisely attached affections to duties, to sweeten toil, and to give that vigour to the exertions of reason which only the heart can give. But, the affection which is put on merely because it is the appropriate insignia of a certain character, when its duties are not fulfilled, is one of the empty compliments which vice and folly are obliged to pay to virtue and the real nature of things.

—Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

The 1818 Preface to *Frankenstein* tells us that the author's "chief concern" in writing the novel had been limited to "avoiding the enervating effects of the novels of the present day and to the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue." Perhaps Percy Shelley's statement was simply one of those ritual declarations of moral intent that we find in prefaces written before the novel became a respectable genre. But if Shelley meant to be descriptive, he was certainly reading *Frankenstein* selectively. It is true that each of the novel's three interconnected narratives is told by a man to whom domestic affection is not merely amiable but positively sacred. Yet each narrator also has been denied the experience he reveres so highly, and cannot, because of this denial, transmit it to a future generation.

The three narratives are thematically linked through the joint predicament of those who have and those who have not the highly desirable experience of domestic affection. The recurrence of this theme suggests that Mary Shelley was at least as much concerned with the limitations of that affection as she was with demonstrating its amiableness. She is explicit, moreover, about the source of these limitations. It is not domestic affection but the context in which it manifests itself that brings death into the world of her novel. And that context is what we have come to describe as the bourgeois family.
In her analysis of domestic affection Mary Shelley carefully sifts the degree to which members of the various families in the novel accede to the separation of male and female spheres of activity characteristic of the bourgeois family. Historically, this separation of spheres had an economic base as factory production replaced cottage industry and as wealth increasingly represented by capital eroded old ties of economic interdependency, not only between landlords and tenants but also between husbands and wives. Female wage laborers were rarely paid even subsistence wages; middle-class wives, on the other hand, welcomed their separation from paid work, now done exclusively by their husbands, as a sign of bourgeois status. Pursuits once restricted to the aristocracy were thus opened to a much larger class of women. Accordingly, considerable attention was paid, by many a writer, to the "nature" of the female sex, the education best suited to its cultivation, and the duties arising from its new relationship to the masculine world of production. An important contributor to this debate was Mary Wollstonecraft, who saw domestic affection undermined by an exaggerated separation between female charm and social usefulness. The success with which she transmitted this view can be seen in both the narrative method and the content of her daughter's first novel.

The structure of Frankenstein, with its three concentric narratives, imposes upon the linear unfolding of the plot the very sort of order that Mary Shelley is commenting on in the novel as a whole: one that separates "outer" and "inner," the masculine sphere of discovery and the feminine sphere of domesticity. Moreover, the sequence in which the reader encounters the three narrators gives the plot line a circular as well as a linear shape. It begins and ends with Walton, writing to his English sister from the outer periphery of the civilized world, the boundary between the known and the unknown. From there we move inward to the circle of civilization, to the rural outskirts of Geneva, birthplace of the Protestant ethic, the spirit of capitalism. Then, in the physical center of the novel, accessible only if one traverses many snowy mountains, we come upon the limited Paradise Regained of the De Lacey family. Here males and females learn together, role distinctions are minimal, and domestic bliss is eventually recovered, largely through the initiative of Safie, a young woman who comes from a world outside the sphere of Western Protestantism. Yet we are not allowed to end with this fiction of the isolated triumph of domestic virtues. Elizabeth Bennett can remove herself to Pemberley away from her family's pride and prejudice; but we follow the dispossessed Monster back into the outer world, witness his destruction of the remnants of Victor's harmonious family circle, and finally behold Walton's defeated attempt to discover in the land of ice and snow a Paradise beyond the domestic and the familiar.

The circularity of Frankenstein underscores Mary Shelley's critique of the insufficiency of a family structure in which the relation between the sexes is as uneven as the relationship between parents and children. The two "outside" narrators, Walton and Frankenstein, are both benevolent men whose exile from the domestic hearth drives them deeper and deeper into isolation. Neither, however, can see that his deprivation might have been avoided through a better understanding of the limits of the institution into which he was born. Even the De Lacey family, where these limits are meaningfully transcended, is basically innocent of what Mary Wollstonecraft, in the title of chapter 9 of her Vindication of the Rights of Woman, had called "the pernicious effects which arise from the unnatural distinctions established in society." The "rational fellowship" of this family nucleus has been enforced by necessity. De Lacey's blindness, combined with the primitive conditions in which his family must create a refuge from the world's injustice, simply makes rigid roles impractical, if not impossible to maintain. Safie has asserted her independence from her Turkish father in the belief that she will be able, in a Christian country, "to aspire to higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit, forbidden to the female followers of Mahomet." She has no idea, in other words, that what she has done would be unthinkable to Elizabeth Lavenza and her virtuous nineteenth-century middle-class counterparts. She and Felix learn from Volney's Ruins of Empires "of the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty; of rank, descent, and noble blood" (p. 120). But they do not read A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, where Mary Wollstonecraft connects the "pernicious effects" of these divisions with the tyranny of husbands over wives and parents over children in the middle-class home.

This leaves only the Monster to articulate the experience of being denied the domestic affections of a child, sibling, husband, and parent. In his campaign of revenge, the Monster goes to the root of his father's character.
deformation, when he wipes out those who played a part, however unwitting, in fostering, justifying, or replicating it. If we view his violent acts as components of a horror story, the novel can be read either as a warning against uncontrolled technology and the ambition that brings it into being, or as a fantasy of the return of the repressed, a drama of man at war with alienated parts of himself, variously identified. But an additional meaning emerges if we also take the violence in the novel to constitute a language of protest, the effect of which is to expose the "wrongs" done to women and children, friends and fiancés, in the name of domestic affection. It is a language none of the characters can fully decode because they lack the perspective on bourgeois domesticity that Mary Shelley had learned, principally from her mother's writings, and which she assumed, perhaps naively, in her readers.

To grasp the subversiveness of Shelley's critique of the family we need to look more closely at her depiction of the various domestic groupings in the novel. Each of the families in the outer two narratives illustrates a differently flawed model of socialization, ranging from the "feminine fosterage" of Walton's sister and the "silken cord" employed by Victor's parents, to the wrongheaded class pride of Caroline Beaufort's father and the overt tyranny of Mme. Moritz. None of these arrangements provides the younger generation with adequate defences against powerful forces in the outside world, forces that can neither be controlled nor escaped through the exercise of domestic affection.

Mary Shelley makes clear that Robert Walton's career has been nourished and shaped by conflicting cultural artifacts. From his uncle's travel books he learned that his culture confers its highest praise on those who endure great personal hardships to bring "inestimable benefits" to all mankind. This knowledge, he tells us, "increased the regret which I had felt, as a child, on learning that my father's dying injunction had forbidden my uncle to allow me to embark on a seafaring life." The fact that he was told this before he began to read suggests that his contact with his father, if any, had taken place very early in his life. There is no mention of a mother, only of the sister whose influence upon him he so persistently acknowledges:

A youth passed in solitude, my best years spent under your gentle and feminine fosterage, has so refined the groundwork of my character that I cannot overcome an intense distaste for the usual brutality exercised on board ship. [P. 20]

Walton's brief account of his "best years" parallels in two particulars the more lengthily elaborated early life of Victor. The parental injunction (which he transmits without any explanation) has the same effect on him that Alphonse Frankenstein's cursory dismissal of the work of Paracelsus and Cornelius Agrippa has on the youthful Victor. The other similarity is between the brother-sister relationship he values so highly and the ersatz sibling bond between Victor and Elizabeth. Lacking a Clerval among his friends, the orphaned Walton regards his sister as his better, because more refined, self. He is markedly uncomfortable in the presence of men who have not been similarly "fostered" by women like his sister. His lieutenant's "endowments," he notes, are "unsoftened by cultivation." In telling his sister the "anecdote" of the sailor's generosity in bestowing his "prize-money" on a rival suitor of the "young Russian lady" who spurned him, Walton suggests that such disinterestedness is nonetheless tainted: "'What a noble fellow!' you will exclaim. He is so; but then he has passed all his life on board a vessel, and has scarcely an idea beyond the ship and the crew."

Walton's stance prevents him from acknowledging that his lieutenant possesses a natural generosity that is instinctive (not unlike that of the Monster). The sailor, he notes, had amassed sufficient wealth to buy himself the hand of the woman he loved. But on discovering that her heart belonged to another, he relinquished his entire fortune to an impoverished rival—thus enabling the lovers to conform to the prevailing social definition of marriage as an economic transaction. The realization that domestic affection may be simply a commodity to be purchased on the marketplace has apparently left the lieutenant highly disenchanted.

Walton, too, possesses sufficient wealth to have made him the target of some real-life Mr. Harlowes and Mrs. Bennetts. "My life might have been passed in ease and luxury," he tells his sister, "but I preferred glory to
every enticement that wealth placed in my path” (p. 17). His quest for glory alienates him from the crew whose physical work is necessary to the success of his venture. Although, unlike nineteenth-century factory owners, Walton does not plan to enrich himself at the expense of his seafaring "hands," he is as baffled by their lack of commitment to his "glorious expedition" as factory owners were by their workers' unwillingness to subordinate their needs to the higher cause of industrial expansion. Determined to find for himself and all mankind a substitute for the domestic affections, Walton nonetheless cannot exorcise the effects of his sister's "gentle and feminine fosterage." The drastic separation of home and workplace enforced on the Arctic explorer cannot be maintained. Walton must behold the "untimely extinction" of the "glorious spirit" that had driven him into the land of ice: "My tears flow; my mind is over-shadowed by a cloud of disappointment. But I journey towards England, and may there find consolation."

In Walton we see a benevolent man made incapable of happiness by the very forces that make him an exemplary, self-denying bourgeois male. Since Victor is caught in the same double bind, it is not surprising that similar forces shape his early life, especially those that separate domestic life from work. The Frankensteins have been, Victor recounts, counsellors and syndics for many generations, distinguished members of the bourgeoisie of Calvinist Geneva, and respected servants of the state as public office holders. Victor's father "had passed his younger days perpetually occupied by the affairs of his country . . . nor was it till the decline of life that he became the husband and father of a family." Although eager to bestow "on the state sons who might carry his virtues and his name down to posterity," Alphonse Frankenstein retired from public life entirely in order to pursue this self-perpetuation. The very first paragraph of Victor's narrative thus presents the same dichotomy between public service and domestic affection already exemplified in an extreme form by Walton's career—a dichotomy, moreover, which will widen for Victor himself as his narrative progresses.

After describing his father's retreat from public life, Victor supplies a second example of such a removal, though not into felicity. Beaufort, Alphonse Frankenstein's friend, was a merchant who, "from a flourishing state, fell, through numerous mischances, into poverty" (p. 31). Fortunately for him, his motherless daughter follows him into exile, where she descends voluntarily into the working class to support them so that her father may be spared a humiliation his male pride could not have endured. Caroline Beaufort's self-sacrifice says a good deal about her conception of domestic affection. De Lacey in the Monster's narrative is blind, and thus actually disabled from sharing the burden of maintaining the family economy. But we are told nothing from which to conclude that Beaufort was unable to work. In the face of misfortune he is passive, a characteristic of other males in the novel, and condones, by that passivity, the exploitation of his daughter.

It is in this nobly submissive attitude that Victor's father finds his future bride, weeping by the coffin of her dead father. This, it would seem, was her finest hour, the shadow of her future idealization and just the kind of scene sentimental nineteenth-century painters loved. Victor's father rescues her from the painful fate of working-class womanhood, bringing her back, after a two-year courtship, by the only route that women can return, that is, through marriage. Yet Beaufort's response to economic reversal, and the success of one friend in finding him, act as a comment on the relationship between class and friendship that one exceptional act does not negate. All of Beaufort's other friends have apparently conformed to the usual pattern of bourgeois behavior when one of their number drops over the economic edge. Given the economic turbulence that marked capitalist development in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the experience of being "ruined" was even more common in life than in novels. Yet in the fiction of the same period it is rare to find the victims of that upheaval sustained by friendship made in better days. Class solidarity was not large enough, it would seem, to encompass misfortune.

Of course Beaufort's personality has not helped the situation. He was, says Victor, "of a proud and unbending disposition, and could not bear to live in poverty and oblivion in the same country where he had formerly been distinguished for his rank and magnificence" (p. 31). Still, his self-removal into oblivion, which his fellow merchants would have imposed had he remained where he was, implies that he is not unique but rather
disposed to view a loss of money in much the same way the others do, that is to say, as a fall from grace. Like
Robert Walton, Beaufort has internalized an ideology which, though painful to him and his daughter,
advances the interests of his class as a whole by purging it of its failures. Domestic affection may be heavily
taxed, but it is the one source of self-esteem left to him once he and his neighbors have collaborated in his
emotional "ruin."

At the center of this ideology is the belief that material prosperity and social recognition are conferred on
superior merit, and thus the lines that divide the bourgeoisie from the rest of humanity reflect worth, not birth.
Nevertheless, this view, while often expressed in the public sphere without shame, was difficult to reconcile
with other Christian teachings. One popular fictional device that obfuscates this ideological contradiction is
that of the "noble peasant" and his various fairy tale counterparts, male and female. Caroline Beaufort's
devotion to her father is the glass slipper that gives her entrée to her new role as child bride. For her, this role
involves revisitations to the fallen world of poverty from which she had been so fortuitously rescued. Her son
explains:

This, to my mother, was more than a duty; it was a necessity, a passion—remembering what
she had suffered and how she had been relieved—for her to act in turn the guardian angel to
the afflicted. [P. 34]

Like her husband, Caroline rejects the harsher side of an ideology that views poverty as a problem to be
solved only through hard work on the part of those afflicted. Motherless herself, she attempts to alleviate
social injustice by becoming a "good mother" to those for whom no Prince Charming is likely to appear. Yet
when she finds one who clearly does not belong where fate has placed her, Caroline's response is to single out
this exception and give her more than periodic bounty. In fact, she gives Elizabeth everything she had: a
bourgeois father, a mother who dies young, a Prince Charming, and a view of the female role as one of
constant, self-sacrificing devotion to others. What is more, she remains dependent, as Elizabeth will be, on
male energy and male provision. When Victor tells us that "My father directed our studies, and my mother
partook of our enjoyments," he unwittingly suggests much about Caroline's reduced sphere of action.

To say that domestic affection, extended into the public sphere, is an inadequate remedy for the ills of an
industrial society would be to fly in the face of an idea that gained immense popularity in the Victorian era,
both in England and in the United States. But to say that Elizabeth's early death, like her adopted mother's,
was a logical outgrowth of the female ideal she sought to embody, is a radical statement indeed. Mary Shelley
may well have thought she was going too far in this direction when she revised her account of Caroline's death
from the following:

Elizabeth had caught the scarlet fever; but her illness was not severe, and she quickly
recovered. During her confinement, many arguments had been urged to persuade my mother
to refrain from attending upon her. She had, at first, yielded to our entreaties; but when she
heard that her favorite was recovering, she could no longer debar herself from her society,
and entered her chamber long before the danger of infection was past. On the third day my
mother sickened. . . .

In 1831 Mary revised this ironic passage. It is precisely because Elizabeth "was in the greatest danger" that
Caroline now

had, at first, yielded to our entreaties; but when she heard that the life of her favorite was
menaced, she could no longer control her anxiety. She attended her sick-bed—her watchful
attentions triumphed over the malignity of the distemper—Elizabeth was saved but the
consequence of this imprudence were fatal to her preserver. On the third day my mother
sickened. . . . [Pp. 42-43]
In the revision Caroline's death is tragic, but not gratuitous. Her motherly touch would seem to have been crucial, whereas in the first version it kills her without benefiting anyone else.

The revised Caroline becomes a heroine in death, but her daughter's self-effacing behavior throughout the novel is singularly ineffectual in actual crisis situations. Her most dramatic public act is her attempt to save Justine, yet all she seems able to do is to display her own goodness, her willingness to trust the accused, to have given her the miniature of her mother, had Justine but asked for it. Yet feminine sweetness does not win court cases. It may captivate male hearts, and even elicit "a murmur of approbation" from those in the courtroom. But making a convincing argument before a male judge and jury requires skills that Elizabeth hardly possesses.

Elizabeth seems unaware of her ineffectuality. She hopes that Victor "perhaps will find some means to justify my poor guiltless Justine." Still, like Alphonse Frankenstein, who believes in Justine's guilt, Elizabeth is uninterested in pursuing the truth: that the "evidence" that convicts Justine has been planted. The description of Justine's apprehension makes this oversight seem truly incredible. Ernest, Victor's younger brother, tells the story:

He related that, the morning on which the murder of poor William had been discovered, Justine had been taken ill, and confined to her bed for several days. During this interval, one of the servants, happening to examine the apparel she had worn the night of the murder, had discovered in her pocket the picture of my mother, which had been judged to be the temptation of the murderer. The servant instantly showed it to one of the others, who, without saying a word to any of the family, went to a magistrate; and, upon their deposition, Justine was apprehended. [P. 79]

This act on the part of two servants is certainly one that might reasonably arouse suspicion on the part of their employers, but the Frankensteins appear to view their inability to suspect anyone as one of their greatest virtues. Furthermore, for a murderer to keep such a damning piece of evidence on her person is at least questionable, yet none of the bereaved family even thinks of raising the issue in Justine's defence. Instead, believing in the power of domestic affection unaided by deductive reasoning, they follow the lead of the elder Frankenstein, who urges his family to "rely on the justice of our laws, and the activity with which I shall prevent the slightest show of partiality."

Elizabeth's passivity, however, goes beyond a suspension of the need to find little William's true murderer. On hearing of the boy's death, she immediately blames herself for having given him the miniature to wear. And if this is her response, when no finger is pointing at her, how much less able to defend herself is Justine, whose very confusion is interpreted as a sign of her guilt. Both Justine and Elizabeth have learned well the lessons of submissiveness and devotion to others that Caroline Beaufort epitomized for them. Their model behavior similarly lowers their resistance to the forces that kill them.

Of the education Justine received in the Frankenstein household we know only that it was "superior to that which [her mistress] intended at first," and that Justine thought this second mother of hers to be "the model of all excellence, and endeavoured to imitate her phraseology and manners" (p. 65). We know a lot more about Elizabeth's education, particularly from the second edition of the novel, where Mary Shelley expanded two sentences that appear in her husband's handwriting in the original manuscript. In the original,

I delighted [says Victor] in investigating the facts relative to the actual world; she busied herself in following the aerial creations of the poets. The world was to me a secret, which I desired to discover; to her it was a vacancy, which she sought to people with imaginations of her own.9
Here we see the crucial difference in the respective educations of the two figures: Victor translates his interest in science into a career aspiration, while Elizabeth translates her interest into a substitute for experience, a way of filling a void created by her lack of contact with the outside world.

In her 1831 revision, Shelley lays even greater stress on the domestic harmony that formed the context of the early education of Elizabeth, Victor, and their friend Clerval. She develops the division of the realm of masculine knowledge between Victor and Clerval, connecting (in Clerval's case especially) their studies and their future aspirations:

It was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn; and whether it was the outward substance of things, or the inner spirit of nature and the mysterious soul of man that occupied me, still my enquiries were directed toward the metaphysical, or, in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world.

Meanwhile, Clerval occupied himself, so to speak, with the moral relations of things. The busy stage of life, the virtues of heroes, and the actions of men, were his theme, and his hope and his dream was to become one of those whose names are recorded in story, as the gallant and adventurous benefactors of our species. [P. 37]

Elizabeth's literary studies, on the other hand, have been dropped rather than developed. She is now shown to spend her entire time shining "like a shrine-dedicated lamp in our peaceful home." To whom, one may ask, is this shrine dedicated? Both editions remark that Elizabeth and Victor "were strangers to any species of disunion or dispute." But in the first they learn Latin and English together so that they "might read the writings in those languages," while in the second her participation in the studies of the other two is quite different:

She was the living spirit of love to soften and attract: I might have become sullen in my study, rough through the ardour of my nature, but that she was there to subdue me to a semblance of her own gentleness. And Clerval—could aught ill entrench on the noble spirit of Clerval?—yet he might not have been so perfectly humane, so thoughtful in his generosity—so full of kindness and tenderness amidst his passion for adventurous exploit, had not she unfolded to him the real loveliness of beneficence, and made the doing good the end and aim of his soaring ambition. [P. 38]

What Mary Shelley spells out, in these additions, is Elizabeth's role in maintaining the atmosphere of continual sunshine in which Victor claims he spent his best years.

One might argue that Elizabeth was not harmed by having her mind filled with these exclusive demands, that she was in fact happy with the "trifling occupations" that took up all her time after Victor and Clerval left their common schoolroom, occupations whose reward was "seeing nothing but happy, kind faces around me" (p. 64). Or one might say that she was being excessively modest, that keeping others happy generally and softening the "sometimes violent" temper and "vehement passions" (p. 37) of two male students in particular, is no trifling occupation. Thomas Gisborne, whose extensive treatment of The Duties of the Female Sex was first published in 1797, was one of the many debaters on the nature of women who held this latter view. He posited three general categories of female duties, "each of which," he insisted, "is of extreme and never-ceasing concern to the welfare of mankind." The second of these sets of duties entails "forming and improving the general manners, dispositions, and conduct of the other sex, by society and example." Female excellence, he observed, was best displayed in "the sphere of domestic life," where it manifests itself in sprightliness and vivacity, in quickness of perception, fertility of invention, in powers adapted to unbend the brow of the learned, to refresh the over-laboured faculties of the wise,
and to diffuse throughout the family circle the enlivening and endearing smile of cheerfulness.\textsuperscript{10}

But Mary Wollstonecraft, debating from the other side, had very different views on the kind of education Elizabeth receives in the second version of \textit{Frankenstein}. For her "the only way to make [women] properly attentive to their domestic duties" was to "open" political and moral subjects to them. "An active mind," she asserts, "embraces the whole circle of its duties and finds time enough for all."\textsuperscript{11} Victor praises his adopted sibling for her charms and graces, for which "everyone loved" her. But her education has no content, and she does not live long enough for Victor to test Wollstonecraft's assertion that "unless the understanding be cultivated, superficial and monotonous is every grace." What is not evident to Victor is certainly evident to the reader, however. Elizabeth is not a real force in the novel: she is too superficial and monotonous.

The division into roles that takes place in the Frankenstein schoolroom corresponds roughly to the divisions described in Plato's \textit{Republic}. There the citizens learn in earliest childhood a "myth of the metals" which divides them into groups according to whether intellect, courage, or neither predominates in their makeup. The purpose of the indoctrination is to eliminate friction in the kingdom. But in \textit{Frankenstein} the division has the opposite effect: Victor, divided from his courageous, moral self as well as from his ability to subdue his own vehement passions, sets in motion a chain of events that will destroy those parts of a potentially whole human psyche that he has already partly lost through his conflict-free upbringing.

There is in Victor much that could not find expression without disrupting the tranquility of his happy home. On leaving that home he indulges at first "in the most melancholy reflections." But, he continues,

\begin{quote}
\textit{as I proceeded my spirits and hopes rose. I ardently desired the acquisition of knowledge. I had often, when at home, thought it hard to remain during my youth cooped up in one place, and had longed to enter the world, and take my station among other human beings. [P. 45]}
\end{quote}

Unfortunately for him, these other human beings turn out all to be male, their sisters and daughters being busied with " trifling occupations" within the safety of the domestic circle. Only males, in the world of the novel's second narrator, are seen acting upon their longings to acquire knowledge, to leave a home that coops them up, and to take their places in the world.

Thus Victor discovers a flaw in the wall that keeps his hearth untouched by evil from the outside: you cannot take its protective magic with you when you leave. For Elizabeth's power "to soften and attract" does him little good if he must leave it behind when he goes "to take [his] station among other human beings." He may be devoted to preserving her innocence, grounded in passivity, and revere her for her self-denying dedication to the happiness of others. But since these qualities cut her off from any active engagement in his life, and thus deprive him of a real companion, her supposed perfection only intensifies his isolation. Unable to detect any flaws in his mother's and Elizabeth's unreproaching dependency, he creates in the Monster a dependent child who does reproach him for his neglect. Furthermore, by making this child ugly he can justify his neglect by appealing to a prejudice shared by all the characters in the novel: resentment toward (and cruelty to) an ugly helpless creature is perfectly appropriate human behavior. Indignation is aroused in the novel only by cruelty to beautiful children like Elizabeth and William. Thus Victor can vent on his Monster all the negative emotion that would otherwise have no socially acceptable object and remain unaware of the transference he has made from his child bride to his "child."

From Victor's remarks about spending his youth "cooped up in one place," we may surmise that his feelings of resentment, for which the Monster becomes an uncontrollable "objective correlative," had their first stirrings while the would-be scientist-hero was still blissfully lodged in the womb of domesticity. But resentment in Paradise, for Victor no less than for Satan himself, leads to an expulsion that intensifies the resentment. Outside the home, there is nothing to prevent that feeling from growing until it reaches literally murderous
proportions. Had Victor not been so furtive about his desire to astound the world, he might have allowed himself time to make a creature his own size, one who mirrored the whole of him, not just the part of himself he cannot bring home. But to do that he would have had to be a whole person outside the home and a whole person within it.

Repeatedly throughout the novel Shelley gives us examples of the ways in which the insulated bourgeois family creates and perpetuates divided selves in the name of domestic affection by walling that affection in and keeping "disunion and dispute" out. We have noticed already that those whose role is to embody domestic affection cannot go out into the world. "Insiders" cannot leave, or do so at their peril. At the same time Shelley dramatizes, through the experiences of Victor's creature, that "outsiders" cannot enter; they are condemned to perpetual exile and deprivation, forbidden even from trying to create a domestic circle of their own. This point is emphasized by the fate of Justine, who succeeds in imitating to perfection the similarly rescued Caroline Beaufort, but who is abandoned at the first suggestion of rebellion. By having Justine abandoned first by her own jealous mother, Shelley is making her most devastating indictment of bourgeois socialization: another family cannot, as Milton put it, "rectify the wrongs of our first parents."

The Frankenstein family fails Justine because its response to her at a time of crisis was passivity. Yet here the distinction between "outsiders" and "insiders" breaks down: the Frankensteins respond to one another, when crises come, in the same way, adjuring one another to repress their anger and grief for the sake of maintaining tranquility.

Their repressed emotions, especially anger, are acted out by others. We can see this in the behavior of the jurors at Justine's trial: they are ruled by the spirit of vengeance that the family members themselves refuse to admit into their consciousness. Of course the Monster is the example par excellence of this process of projection, and his victims come from within the family circle as well as outside it. Their only crime is that they participated (voluntarily) in the process of self-division that left Victor incapable of being a loving father, passive in the face of crises, and content to let other people complete him.

The one murder that does not seem to fit into this scheme is that of "little William." What we know of him comes only from Elizabeth, who notes his beauty and his precocious interest in domestic affection in its traditional form:

> When he smiles, two little dimples appear on each cheek, which are rose with health. He has already had one or two little wives, but Louisa Biron is his favorite, a pretty little girl of five years of age. [P. 66]

Ernest Frankenstein is drawn to a life of adventure and a career in the foreign service, though he does not have, Elizabeth reports, Victor's powers of application. Thus William, preparing to be just like his "papa," is the one on whom Victor can indirectly visit, through the agency of the Monster, a resentment against a childhood spent in domestic role-playing.

The hothouse atmosphere in which Victor and later William play with their "pretty little" child brides stands in contrast to the mutually supportive, matter-of-fact life of Felix and Agatha De Lacey. Nor is this the only point on which the De Laceys contrast with the other families in the novel. They are the only family that perpetuates itself into the next generation, largely because no one in it is striving for the kind of personal immortality that propels Victor and Walton out of their respective domestic Edens. De Lacey père, like Beaufort and Frankenstein the elder, was once a prosperous member of the bourgeoisie. He was exiled and stripped of his fortune and place in the social order because his son, motivated by benevolence, impulsively aided in the escape of a Turk who was a victim of French racism and political injustice. But his idealistic impulse precipitates events in "the world" that are beyond his control, events that bring down ruin on his whole family.
The De Laceys exhibit a great deal less rigidity, however, when coping with misfortune than either of the two Genevese families who are called upon to deal with ruin or bereavement. Not that they are entirely happy. Although the father encourages "his children, as sometimes I found that he called them, to cast off their melancholy" (p. 112), his blindness prevents him from seeing that there is often not enough food for himself and them too. But if the land nurtures them meagerly even with the help of the Monster, it is at least a resource for meeting real needs. The relationship of the De Laceys to nature significantly differs from that of Victor, for whom nature can only provide occasions for the repeated display of a histrionic sensibility.

Furthermore, the social exile of the De Laceys is involuntary; they did not choose it, nor do they blame Felix and exile him as a punishment for the fate they must all share. Victor's family is incapable of such action. Returning home after his first encounter with the Monster as a speaking creature, he notes:

> My haggard and wild appearance awoke intense alarm; but I answered no question, scarcely did I speak. I felt as if I were placed under a ban—as if I had no right to claim their sympathies—as if never more might I enjoy companionship with them. [P. 149]

One might almost think this was the Monster speaking of his relationship with the De Lacey family. Victor's refusal, or inability, to be an accepting father to his creature, and to give him a companion who would share his sorrows as well as his joys, is a repetition of his own father's refusal to accept or give to him. His exile, as he portrays it in this passage and elsewhere, is largely self-imposed. He "answered no question," but questions were asked. Nevertheless, everything we have seen about the Frankenstein family's mode of dealing with the disturbing reality outside their circle indicates that Victor is right to keep quiet, that his revelations might provoke a response even more damaging than alarm: they might pretend he had never spoken.12

The deficiencies of Victor's family, dramatized in his inability to bring the Monster home (openly, that is), to deal with evil in the outside world, or to own the repressed impulses that others are acting out for him, stem ultimately from the concept of domestic affection on which the continuing tranquility of the family depends. The root of this evil lies in the separation of male and female spheres for purposes of maintaining the purity of the family and the sanctity of the home. The effect of domestic affection on both Victor and Walton is "an invincible repugnance to new countenances" that leads them toward the solitary pursuit of glory, which paradoxically disqualifies them for domestic affection. Once touched by the outside world, they cannot reenter the domestic circle without destroying its purity. Victor's rejection of the Monster also makes it impossible for him to embrace Elizabeth without destroying the purity that is her major attraction in his eyes.

Scholarly interest in the bourgeois family, the target of Mary Shelley's critique of domestic affection, has received a good deal of impetus in the last ten years from the feminist movement's attempts to name and trace the origins of what Betty Friedan has called "the problem that has no name."13 Shelley seems to suggest that, if the family is to be a viable institution for the transmission of domestic affection from one generation to the next, it must redefine that precious commodity in such a way that it can extend to "outsiders" and become hardy enough to survive in the world outside the home. It is not surprising that a woman should be making this point. Eradicating the artificial gulf between the work of the world and the work of the home is of greater concern to women than men since they experience in almost every aspect of their lives the resultant "unnatural distinctions established in society" against which Mary Wollstonecraft protested almost two hundred years ago. If we can imagine a novel in which a woman scientist creates a monster who returns to destroy her family, the relevance to women of the problem that Mary Shelley has imagined becomes more immediately apparent.

The one character who clearly exemplifies such a redefined notion of domestic affection is Safie, the daughter of a Christian Arab woman who, "born in freedom, spurned the bondage to which she was now reduced" upon her marriage to the Turk. Safie's father had rescued his wife from slavery, just as Victor's father had rescued Caroline Beaufort from poverty. But instead of translating her gratitude into lifelong subservience and
sporadic charity, this woman taught her daughter "to aspire to higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit forbidden to the female followers of Mahomet" (p. 124). Safie's lucid perception of the Tightness of her mother's views was doubtless only confirmed by her father's selfish duplicity in encouraging her union with Felix when it served his purposes while at the same time he "loathed the idea that his daughter should be united to a Christian."

Although Safie is, like Mary Shelley, motherless when she must put her early training to the test, she applies her mother's teachings in a way that is intended to contrast, I believe, with the behavior of the passive Elizabeth, equally influenced by her adopted mother's teachings and example. Safie discovers that her mind is sickened at the prospect of again returning to Asia, and being immured within the walls of a harem, allowed only to occupy herself with infantile amusements, ill suited to the temper of her soul, now accustomed to grand ideas and the noble emulation of virtue. [P. 124]

In consequence, she not only refuses to wait for the possibility that her lover will miraculously find her, but actively seeks Felix out, traveling through Europe with only an attendant for protection. Had Elizabeth been encouraged "to aspire to higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit," she might have followed Victor to Ingolstadt and perhaps even have insisted that he provide the Monster a companion for his wanderings. As it is, Victor cannot conceive of involving Elizabeth in his work on any level; both are petrified in fatally polarized worlds.

In her essay, Ellen Moers observes that *Frankenstein* "is a birth myth, and one that was lodged in the novelist's imagination . . . by the fact that she was herself a mother" (p. 79). But women are daughters before they are mothers, and daughters of fathers as well as mothers, as U. C. Knoepflmacher points out. The kind of family that Shelley is describing shapes us still: its most distinctive feature is that of the dominant yet absent father, working outside the home to support a dependent (or underpaid), subservient wife and children, all roles circularly functioning to reinforce his dominance. *Frankenstein* is indeed a birth myth, but one in which the parent who "brought death into the world, and all our woe" is not a woman but a man who has pushed the masculine prerogative past the limits of nature, creating life not through the female body but in a laboratory.

Victor's father seems to be the exception that proves the rule. He is an absent father for Victor not because he leaves home every day but because he does not. He is so uninvolved in matters that do not pertain directly to the domestic tranquility that he does not act to guide Victor's interest in science—an interest he shared with his son in the first version of the novel but not the second. Likewise, Victor is alienated from his "child" not by his work but by his desire to flee to the shelter of domesticity, which gives a further twist to the already novel image of a man giving birth and then escaping his parental responsibility. The price paid for the schisms that are encouraged behind the pleasant façade of "domestic affection" may be higher than even Mary Shelley could imagine. The modern world can create worse monsters.

Notes


4 *A Vindication*, chaps. 9-11, pp. 140-57.

5 See George Levine on pp. 15-16, above.

7 In his discussion, U. C. Knoepflmacher draws numerous parallels between Mary Shelley and her characters. The links between Mary and both Caroline Beaufort and Elizabeth Lavenza are reenforced in other ways: Mary's mother also died young, leaving her orphaned daughter with a father who "passed his younger days perpetually occupied in the affairs of his country; a variety of circumstances had prevented his marrying early, nor was it until the decline of life that he became a husband and father of a family." If both Caroline and Elizabeth are retrieved by Alphonse Frankenstein, a Prince Charming also rescued Mary (or so she at first thought) from the family with which she could not be happily accommodated.


11 *A Vindication*, p. 169.

12 Examples of this mode of paternal interaction, and of the schizophrenia it elicits, may be found in R. D. Laing and A. Esterson, *Sanity, Madness, and the Family* (Middlesex, England, 1970).


**Criticism: Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (essay date 1979)**


*[In the following excerpt, Gilbert and Gubar view Frankenstein not so much in terms of Shelley's relationship to her own father as in her relationship to literary patriarchy in general, figured in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Noting that Shelley read Milton's poem before writing her novel, the critics assert that Shelley adopted the misogyny of *Paradise Lost* into her own "pained ambivalence toward mothers."]*

Many critics have noticed that *Frankenstein* (1818) is one of the key Romantic "readings" of *Paradise Lost*.14 Significantly, however, as a woman's reading it is most especially the story of hell: hell as a dark parody of heaven, hell's creations as monstrous imitations of heaven's creations, and hellish femaleness as a grotesque parody of heavenly maleness. But of course the divagations of the parody merely return to and reinforce the fearful reality of the original. For by parodying *Paradise Lost* in what may have begun as a secret, barely conscious attempt to subvert Milton, Shelley ended up telling, too, the central story of *Paradise Lost*, the tale of "what misery th' inabstinence of Eve / Shall bring on men."

Mary Shelley herself claims to have been continually asked "how I . . . came to think of and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea" as that of *Frankenstein*, but it is really not surprising that she should have formulated her anxieties about femaleness in such highly literary terms. For of course the nineteen-year-old girl who
Frankenstein was no ordinary nineteen-year-old but one of England's most notable literary heiresses. Indeed, as "the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity," and the wife of a third, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley was the daughter and later the wife of some of Milton's keenest critics, so that Harold Bloom's useful conceit about the family romance of English literature is simply an accurate description of the reality of her life.15

In acknowledgement of this web of literary/familial relationships, critics have traditionally studied Frankenstein as an interesting example of Romantic myth-making, a work ancillary to such established Prometheus masterpieces as Shelley's Prometheus Unbound and Byron's Manfred. ("Like almost everything else about [Mary's] life," one such critic remarks, Frankenstein "is an instance of genius observed and admired but not shared."16) Recently, however, a number of writers have noticed the connection between Mary Shelley's "waking dream" of monster-manufacture and her own experience of awakening sexuality, in particular the "horror story of Maternity" which accompanied her precipitous entrance into what Ellen Moers calls "teen-age motherhood."17 Clearly they are articulating an increasingly uneasy sense that, despite its male protagonist and its underpinning of "masculine" philosophy, Frankenstein is somehow a "woman's book," if only because its author was caught up in such a maelstrom of sexuality at the time she wrote the novel.

In making their case for the work as female fantasy, though, critics like Moers have tended to evade the problems posed by what we must define as Frankenstein's literariness. Yet, despite the weaknesses in those traditional readings of the novel that overlook its intensely sexual materials, it is still undeniably true that Mary Shelley's "ghost story," growing from a Keatsian (or Coleridgean) waking dream, is a Romantic novel about—among other things—Romanticism, as well as a book about books and perhaps, too, about the writers of books. Any theorist of the novel's femaleness and of its significance as, in Moers's phrase, a "birth myth" must therefore confront this self-conscious literariness. For as was only natural in "the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity," Mary Shelley explained her sexuality to herself in the context of her reading and its powerfully felt implications.

For this orphaned literary heiress, highly charged connections between femaleness and literariness must have been established early, and established specifically in relation to the controversial figure of her dead mother. As we shall see, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin read her mother's writings over and over again as she was growing up. Perhaps more important, she undoubtedly read most of the reviews of her mother's Posthumous Works, reviews in which Mary Wollstonecraft was attacked as a "philosophical wanton" and a monster, while her Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) was called "A scripture, archly fram'd for propagating w[ho]res."18 But in any case, to the "philosophical wanton's" daughter, all reading about (or of) her mother's work must have been painful, given her knowledge that that passionate feminist writer had died in giving life to her, to bestow upon Wollstonecraft's death from complications of childbirth the melodramatic cast it probably had for the girl herself. That Mary Shelley was conscious, moreover, of a strangely intimate relationship between her feelings toward her dead mother, her romance with a living poet, and her own sense of vocation as a reader and writer is made perfectly clear by her habit of "taking her books to Mary Wollstonecraft's grave in St. Paneras' Churchyard, there," as Muriel Spark puts it, "to pursue her studies in an atmosphere of communion with a mind greater than the second Mrs. Godwin's [and] to meet Shelley in secret."19

Her mother's grave: the setting seems an unusually grim, even ghoulish locale for reading, writing, or lovemaking. Yet, to a girl with Mary Shelley's background, literary activities, like sexual ones, must have been primarily extensions of the elaborate, gothic psychodrama of her family history. If her famous diary is largely a compendium of her reading lists and Shelley's that fact does not, therefore, suggest unusual reticence on her part. Rather, it emphasizes the point that for Mary, even more than for most writers, reading a book was often an emotional as well as an intellectual event of considerable magnitude. Especially because she never knew her mother, and because her father seemed so definitively to reject her after her youthful elopement, her principal mode of self-definition—certainly in the early years of her life with Shelley, when
she was writing *Frankenstein*—was through reading, and to a lesser extent through writing.

Endlessly studying her mother's works and her father's, Mary Shelley may be said to have "read" her family and to have been related to her reading, for books appear to have functioned as her surrogate parents, pages and words standing in for flesh and blood. That much of her reading was undertaken in Shelley's company, moreover, may also help explain some of this obsessiveness, for Mary's literary inheritance was obviously involved in her very literary romance and marriage. In the years just before she wrote *Frankenstein*, for instance, and those when she was engaged in composing the novel (1816-17), she studied her parent's writings, alone or together with Shelley, like a scholarly detective seeking clues to the significance of some cryptic text.20

To be sure, this investigation of the mysteries of literary genealogy was done in a larger context. In these same years, Mary Shelley recorded innumerable readings of contemporary gothic novels, as well as a program of study in English, French, and German literature that would do credit to a modern graduate student. But especially, in 1815, 1816, and 1817, she read the works of Milton: *Paradise Lost* (twice), *Paradise Regained*, *Comus, Areopagitica, Lycidas*. And what makes the extent of this reading particularly impressive is the fact that in these years, her seventeenth to her twenty-first, Mary Shelley was almost continuously pregnant, "confined," or nursing. At the same time, it is precisely the coincidence of all these disparate activities—her family studies, her initiation into adult sexuality, and her literary self-education—that makes her vision of *Paradise Lost* so significant. For her developing sense of herself as a literary creature and/or creator seems to have been inseparable from her emerging self-definition as daughter, mistress, wife, and mother. Thus she cast her birth myth—her myth of origins—in precisely those cosmogenic terms to which her parents, her husband, and indeed her whole literary culture continually alluded: the terms of *Paradise Lost*, which (as she indicates even on the title page of her novel), she saw as preceding, paralleling, and commenting upon the Greek cosmogeny of the Prometheus play her husband had just translated. It is as a female fantasy of sex and reading, then, a gothic psychodrama reflecting Mary Shelley's own sense of what we might call bibliogenesis, that *Frankenstein* is a version of the misogynistic story implicit in *Paradise Lost*.

It would be a mistake to underestimate the significance of *Frankenstein's* title page, with its allusive subtitle ("The Modern Prometheus") and carefully pointed Miltonic epigraph ("Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me man? Did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?"). But our first really serious clue to the highly literary nature of this history of a creature born outside history is its author's use of an unusually evidentiary technique for conveying the stories of her monster and his maker. Like a literary jigsaw puzzle, a collection of apparently random documents from whose juxtaposition the scholar-detective must infer a meaning, *Frankenstein* consists of three "concentric circles" of narration (Walton's letters, Victor Frankenstein's recital to Walton, and the monster's speech to Frankenstein), within which are embedded pockets of digression containing other miniature narratives (Frankenstein's mother's story, Elizabeth Lavenza's and Justine's stories, Felix's and Agatha's story, Safie's story), etc.21 As we have noted, reading and assembling documentary evidence, examining it, analyzing it and researching it comprised for Shelley a crucial if voyeuristic method of exploring origins, explaining identity, understanding sexuality. Even more obviously, it was a way of researching and analyzing an emotionally unintelligible text, like *Paradise Lost*. In a sense, then, even before *Paradise Lost* as a central item on the monster's reading list becomes a literal event in *Frankenstein*, the novel's literary structure prepares us to confront Milton's patriarchal epic, both as a sort of research problem and as the framework for a complex system of allusions.

The book's dramatic situations are equally resonant. Like Mary Shelley, who was a puzzled but studious Miltonist, this novel's key characters—Walton, Frankenstein, and the monster—are obsessed with problem-solving. "I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited," exclaims the young explorer, Walton, as he embarks like a child "on an expedition of discovery up his native river" (2, letter 1). "While my companions contemplated . . . the magnificent appearance of things," declares Frankenstein, the scientist of sexual ontology, "I delighted in investigating their causes" (22, chap. 2). "Who
was I? What was I? Whence did I come?" (113-15, chap. 15) the monster reports wondering, describing endless speculations cast in Miltonic terms. All three, like Shelley herself, appear to be trying to understand their presence in a fallen world, and trying at the same time to define the nature of the lost paradise that must have existed before the fall. But unlike Adam, all three characters seem to have fallen not merely from Eden but from the earth, fallen directly into hell, like Sin, Satan, and—by implication—Eve. Thus their questionings are in some sense female, for they belong in that line of literary women's questionings of the fall into gender which goes back at least to Anne Finch's plaintive "How are we fal'n?" and forward to Sylvia Plath's horrified "I have fallen very far!"22

From the first, however, Frankenstein answers such neo-Miltonic questions mainly through explicit or implicit allusions to Milton, retelling the story of the fall not so much to protest against it as to clarify its meaning. The parallels between those two Promethean overreachers Walton and Frankenstein, for instance, have always been clear to readers. But that both characters can, therefore, be described (the way Walton describes Frankenstein) as "fallen angels" is not as frequently remarked. Yet Frankenstein himself is perceptive enough to ask Walton "Do you share my madness?" at just the moment when the young explorer remarks Satanically that "One man's life or death were but a small price to pay . . . for the dominion I [wish to] acquire" (13, letter 4). Plainly one fallen angel can recognize another. Alienated from his crew and chronically friendless, Walton tells his sister that he longs for a friend "on the wide ocean," and what he discovers in Victor Frankenstein is the fellowship of hell.

In fact, like the many other secondary narratives Mary Shelley offers in her novel, Walton's story is itself an alternative version of the myth of origins presented in Paradise Lost. Writing his ambitious letters home from St. Petersburgh [sic], Archangel, and points north, Walton moves like Satan away from the sanctity and sanity represented by his sister, his crew, and the allegorical names of the places he leaves. Like Satan, too, he seems at least in part to be exploring the frozen frontiers of hell in order to attempt a return to heaven, for the "country of eternal light" he envisions at the Pole (1, letter 1) has much in common with Milton's celestial "Fountain of Light" (PL 3. 375).23 Again, like Satan's (and Eve's) aspirations, his ambition has violated a patriarchal decree: his father's "dying injunction" had forbidden him "to embark on a seafaring life." Moreover, even the icy hell where Walton encounters Frankenstein and the monster is Miltonic, for all three of these diabolical wanderers must learn, like the fallen angels of Paradise Lost, that "Beyond this flood a frozen Continent / Lies dark and wild . . . / Thither by harpy-footed Furies hal'd, / At certain revolutions all the damn'd / Are brought . . . From Beds of raging Fire to starve in Ice" (PL 2. 587-600).

Finally, another of Walton's revelations illuminates not only the likeness of his ambitions to Satan's but also the similarity of his anxieties to those of his female author. Speaking of his childhood, he reminds his sister that, because poetry had "lifted [my soul] to heaven," he had become a poet and "for one year lived in a paradise of my own creation." Then he adds ominously that "You are well-acquainted with my failure and how heavily I bore the disappointment" (2-3, letter 1). But of course, as she confesses in her introduction to Frankenstein, Mary Shelley, too, had spent her childhood in "waking dreams" of literature; later, both she and her poet-husband hoped she would prove herself "worthy of [her] parentage and enroll [herself] on the page of fame" (xii). In a sense, then, given the Miltonic context in which Walton's story of poetic failure is set, it seems possible that one of the anxious fantasies his narrative helps Mary Shelley covertly examine is the fearful tale of a female fall from a lost paradise of art, speech, and autonomy into a hell of sexuality, silence, and filthy materiality, "A Universe of death, which God by curse / Created evil, for evil only good, / Where all life dies, death lives, and Nature breeds, / Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things" (PL 2. 622-25).

Walton and his new friend Victor Frankenstein have considerably more in common than a Byronic (or Monk Lewis-ish) Satanism. For one thing, both are orphans, as Frankenstein's monster is and as it turns out all the major and almost all the minor characters in Frankenstein are, from Caroline Beaufort and Elizabeth Lavenza to Justine, Felix, Agatha, and Safie. Victor Frankenstein has not always been an orphan, though, and Shelley devotes much space to an account of his family history. Family histories, in fact, especially those of orphans,
appear to fascinate her, and wherever she can include one in the narrative she does so with an obsessiveness suggesting that through the disastrous tale of the child who becomes "an orphan and a beggar" she is once more recounting the story of the fall, the expulsion from paradise, and the confrontation of hell. For Milton's Adam and Eve, after all, began as motherless orphans reared (like Shelley herself) by a stern but kindly father-god, and ended as beggars rejected by God (as she was by Godwin when she eloped).

Thus Caroline Beaufort's father dies leaving her "an orphan and a beggar," and Elizabeth Lavenza also becomes "an orphan and a beggar"—the phrase is repeated (18, 20, chap. 1)—with the disappearance of her father into an Austrian dungeon. And though both girls are rescued by Alphonse Frankenstein, Victor's father, the early alienation from the patriarchal chain-of-being signalled by their orphanhood prefigures the hellish fate in store for them and their family. Later, motherless Safie and fatherless Justine enact similarly ominous anxiety fantasies about the fall of woman into orphanhood and beggary.

Beyond their orphanhood, however, a universal sense of guilt links such diverse figures as Justine, Felix, and Elizabeth, just as it will eventually link Victor, Walton, and the monster. Justine, for instance, irrationally confesses to the murder of little William, though she knows perfectly well she is innocent. Even more irrationally, Elizabeth is reported by Alphonse Frankenstein to have exclaimed "Oh, God! I have murdered my darling child!" after her first sight of the corpse of little William (57, chap. 7). Victor, too, long before he knows that the monster is actually his brother's killer, decides that his "creature" has killed William and that therefore he, the creator, is the "true murderer": "the mere presence of the idea," he notes, is "an irresistible proof of the fact" (60, chap. 7). Complicity in the murder of the child William is, it seems, another crucial component of the Original Sin shared by prominent members of the Frankenstein family.

At the same time, the likenesses among all these characters—the common alienation, the shared guilt, the orphanhood and beggary—imply relationships of redundance between them like the solipsistic relationships among artfully placed mirrors. What reinforces our sense of this hellish solipsism is the barely disguised incest at the heart of a number of the marriages and romances the novel describes. Most notably, Victor Frankenstein is slated to marry his "more than sister" Elizabeth Lavenza, whom he confesses to having always considered "a possession of my own" (21, chap. 1). But the mysterious Mrs. Saville, to whom Walton's letters are addressed, is apparently in some sense his more than sister, just as Caroline Beaufort was clearly a "more than" wife, in fact a daughter, to her father's friend Alphonse Frankenstein. Even relationless Justine appears to have a metaphorically incestuous relationship with the Franksteins, since as their servant she becomes their possession and more than sister, while the female monster Victor half-constructs in Scotland will be a more than sister as well as a mate to the monster, since both have the same parent/creator.

Certainly at least some of this incest-obsession in Frankenstein is, as Ellen Moers remarks, the "standard" sensational matter of Romantic novels. Some of it, too, even without the conventions of the gothic thriller, would be a natural subject for an impressionable young woman who had just spent several months in the company of the famously incestuous author of Manfred. Nevertheless, the streak of incest that darkens Frankenstein probably owes as much to the book's Miltonic framework as it does to Mary Shelley's own life and times. In the Edenic cosiness of their childhood, for instance, Victor and Elizabeth are incestuous as Adam and Eve are, literally incestuous because they have the same creator, and figuratively so because Elizabeth is Victor's pretty plaything, the image of an angelic soul or "epipsyche" created from his own soul just as Eve is created from Adam's rib. Similarly, the incestuous relationships of Satan and Sin, and by implication of Satan and Eve, are mirrored in the incest fantasies of Frankenstein, including the disguised but intensely sexual waking dream in which Victor Frankenstein in effect couples with his monster by applying "the instruments of life" to its body and inducing a shudder of response (42, chap. 5). For Milton, and therefore for Mary Shelley, who was trying to understand Milton, incest was an inescapable metaphor for the solipsistic fever of self-awareness that Matthew Arnold was later to call "the dialogue of the mind with itself."
If Victor Frankenstein can be likened to both Adam and Satan, however, who or what is he really? Here we are obliged to confront both the moral ambiguity and the symbolic slipperiness which are at the heart of all the characterizations in *Frankenstein*. In fact, it is probably these continual and complex reallocations of meaning, among characters whose histories echo and re-echo each other, that have been so bewildering to critics. Like figures in a dream, all the people in *Frankenstein* have different bodies and somehow, horribly, the same face, or worse—the same two faces. For this reason, as Muriel Spark notes, even the book's subtitle "The Modern Prometheus" is ambiguous, "for though at first Frankenstein is himself the Prometheus, the vital fire-endowing protagonist, the Monster, as soon as he is created, takes on [a different aspect of] the role."27 Moreover, if we postulate that Mary Shelley is more concerned with Milton than she is with Aeschylus, the intertwining of meanings grows even more confusing, as the monster himself several times points out to Frankenstein, noting "I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel," (84, chap. 10), then adding elsewhere that "God, in pity, made man beautiful . . . after His own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours. . . . Satan had his companions . . . but I am solitary and abhorred" (115, chap. 15). In other words, not only do Frankenstein and his monster both in one way or another enact the story of Prometheus, each is at one time or another like God (Victor as creator, the monster as his creator's "Master"), like Adam (Victor an innocent child, the monster as primordial "creature"), and like Satan (Victor as tormented overreacher, the monster as vengeful fiend).

What is the reason for this continual duplication and reduplication of roles? Most obviously, perhaps, the dreamlike shifting of fantasy figures from part to part, costume to costume, tells us that we are in fact dealing with the psychodrama or waking dream that Shelley herself suspected she had written. Beyond this, however, we would argue that the fluidity of the narrative's symbolic scheme reinforces in another way the crucial significance of the Miltonic skeleton around which Mary Shelley's hideous progeny took shape. For it becomes increasingly clear as one reads *Frankenstein* with *Paradise Lost* in mind that because the novel's author is such an inveterate student of literature, families, and sexuality, and because she is using her novel as a tool to help her make sense of her reading, *Frankenstein* is ultimately a mock *Paradise Lost* in which both Victor and his monster, together with a number of secondary characters, play all the neo-biblical parts over and over again—all except, it seems at first, the part of Eve. Not just the striking omission of any obvious Eve-figure from this "woman's book" about Milton, but also the barely concealed sexual components of the story as well as our earlier analysis of Milton's bogey should tell us, however, that for Mary Shelley the part of Eve is all the parts.

On the surface, Victor seems at first more Adamic than Satanic or Eve-like. His Edenic childhood is an interlude of prelapsarian innocence in which, like Adam, he is sheltered by his benevolent father as a sensitive plant might be "sheltered by the gardener, from every rougher wind" (19-20, chap. 1). When cherubic Elizabeth Lavenza joins the family, she seems as "heaven-sent" as Milton's Eve, as much Victor's "possession" as Adam's rib is Adam's. Moreover, though he is evidently forbidden almost nothing ("My parents [were not] tyrants . . . but the agents and creators of many delights"), Victor hints to Walton that his deific father, like Adam's and Walton's, did on one occasion arbitrarily forbid him to pursue his interest in arcane knowledge. Indeed, like Eve and Satan, Victor blames his own fall at least in part on his father's apparent arbitrariness. "If . . . my father had taken the pains to explain to me that the principles of Agrippa had been entirely exploded. . . . It is even possible that the train of my ideas would never have received the fatal impulse that led to my ruin" (24-25, chap. 2). And soon after asserting this he even associates an incident in which a tree is struck by Jovian thunder bolts with his feelings about his forbidden studies.

As his researches into the "secrets of nature" become more feverish, however, and as his ambition "to explore unknown powers" grows more intense, Victor begins to metamorphose from Adam to Satan, becoming "as Gods" in his capacity of "bestowing animation upon lifeless matter," laboring like a guilty artist to complete his false creation. Finally, in his conversations with Walton he echoes Milton's fallen angel, and Marlowe's, in his frequently reiterated confession that "I bore a hell within me which nothing could extinguish" (72, chap. 8). Indeed, as the "true murderer" of innocence, here cast in the form of the child William, Victor perceives
himself as a diabolical creator whose mind has involuntarily "let loose" a monstrous and "filthy demon" in much the same way that Milton's Satan's swelled head produced Sin, the disgusting monster he "let loose" upon the world. Watching a "noble war in the sky" that seems almost like an intentional reminder that we are participating in a critical rearrangement of most of the elements of *Paradise Lost*, he explains that "I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind . . . nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave and forced to destroy all that was dear to me" (61, chap. 7).

Even while it is the final sign and seal of Victor's transformation from Adam to Satan, however, it is perhaps the Sin-ful murder of the child William that is our first overt clue to the real nature of the bewilderingly disguised set of identity shifts and parallels Mary Shelley incorporated into *Frankenstein*. For as we saw earlier, not just Victor and the monster but also Elizabeth and Justine insist upon responsibility for the monster's misdeed. Feeling "as if I had been guilty of a crime" (41, chap. 4) even before one had been committed, Victor responds to the news of William's death with the same self-accusations that torment the two orphans. And, significantly, for all three—as well as for the monster and little William himself—one focal point of both crime and guilt is an image of that other beautiful orphan, Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein. Passing from hand to hand, pocket to pocket, the smiling miniature of Victor's "angel mother" seems a token of some secret fellowship in sin, as does Victor's post-creation nightmare of transforming a lovely, living Elizabeth, with a single magical kiss, into "the corpse of my dead mother" enveloped in a shroud made more horrible by "grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel" (42, chap. 5). Though it has been disguised, buried, or miniaturized, femaleness—the gender definition of mothers and daughters, orphans and beggars, monsters and false creators—is at the heart of this apparently masculine book.

Because this is so, it eventually becomes clear that though Victor Frankenstein enacts the roles of Adam and Satan like a child trying on costumes, his single most self-defining act transforms him definitively into Eve. For as both Ellen Moers and Marc Rubenstein have pointed out, after much study of the "cause of generation and life," after locking himself away from ordinary society in the tradition of such agonized mothers as Wollstonecraft's Maria, Eliot's Hetty Sorel, and Hardy's Tess, Victor Frankenstein has a baby.28 His "pregnancy" and childbirth are obviously manifested by the existence of the paradoxically huge being who emerges from his "workshop of filthy creation," but even the descriptive language of his creation myth is suggestive: "incredible labours," "emaciated with confinement," "a passing trance," "oppressed by a slow fever," "nervous to a painful degree," "exercise and amusement would . . . drive away incipient disease," "the instruments of life" (39-41, chap. 4), etc. And, like Eve's fall into guilty knowledge and painful maternity, Victor's entrance into what Blake would call the realm of "generation" is marked by a recognition of the necessary interdependence of those complementary opposites, sex and death: "To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death," he observes (36, chap. 4), and in his isolated workshop of filthy creation—filthy because obscenely sexual29—he collects and arranges materials furnished by "the dissecting room and the slaughterhouse." Pursuing "nature to her hiding places" as Eve does in eating the apple, he learns that "the tremendous secrets of the human frame" are the interlocked secrets of sex and death, although, again like Eve, in his first mad pursuit of knowledge he knows not "eating death." But that his actual orgasmic animation of his monster-child takes place "on a dreary night in November," month of All Souls, short days, and the year's last slide toward death, merely reinforces the Miltonic and Blakean nature of his act of generation.

Even while Victor Frankenstein's self-defining procreation dramatically transforms him into an Eve-figure, however, our recognition of its implications reflects backward upon our sense of Victor-as-Satan and our earlier vision of Victor-as-Adam. Victor as Satan, we now realize, was never really the masculine, Byronic Satan of the first book of *Paradise Lost*, but always, instead, the curiously female, outcast Satan who gave birth to Sin. In his Eve-like pride ("I was surprised . . . that I alone should be reserved to discover so astonishing a secret" [37, chap. 4]), this Victor-Satan becomes "dizzy" with his creative powers, so that his monstrous pregnancy, bookishly and solipsistically conceived, reenacts as a terrible bibliogenesis the moment when, in Milton's version, Satan "dizzy swum / In darkness, while [his] head flames thick and fast / Threw
forth, till on the left side op'ning wide" and Sin, Death's mother-to-be, appeared like "a Sign / Portentous" (PL 2: 753-61). Because he has conceived—or, rather, misconceived—his monstrous offspring by brooding upon the wrong books, moreover, this Victor-Satan is paradigmatic, like the falsely creative fallen angel, of the female artist, whose anxiety about her own aesthetic activity is expressed, for instance, in Mary Shelley's deferential introductory phrase about her "hideous progeny," with its plain implication that in her alienated attic workshop of filthy creation she has given birth to a deformed book, a literary abortion or miscarriage. "How [did] I, then a young girl, [come] to think of and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea?" is a key (if disingenuous) question she records. But we should not overlook her word play upon dilate, just as we should not ignore the anxious pun on the word author that is so deeply embedded in Frankenstein.

If the adult, Satanic Victor is Eve-like both in his procreation and his anxious creation, even the young, prelapsarian, and Adamic Victor is—to risk a pun—curiously female, that is, Eve-like. Innocent and guided by silken threads like a Blakean lamb in a Godwinian garden, he is consumed by "a fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature," a longing which—expressed in his explorations of "vaults and charnel-houses," his guilty observations of "the unhallowed damps of the grave," and his passion to understand "the structure of the human frame"—recalls the criminal female curiosity that led Psyche to lose love by gazing upon its secret face, Eve to insist upon consuming "intellectual food," and Prometheus's sister-in-law Pandora to open the forbidden box of fleshly ills. But if Victor-Adam is also Victor-Eve, what is the real significance of the episode in which, away at school and cut off from his family, he locks himself into his workshop of filthy creation and gives birth by intellectual parturition to a giant monster? Isn't it precisely at this point in the novel that he discovers he is not Adam but Eve, not Satan but Sin, not male but female? If so, it seems likely that what this crucial section of Frankenstein really enacts is the story of Eve's discovery not that she must fall but that, having been created female, she is fallen, femaleness and fallenness being essentially synonymous. For what Victor Frankenstein most importantly learns, we must remember, is that he is the "author" of the monster—for him alone is "reserved . . . so astonishing a secret"—and thus it is he who is "the true murderer," he who unleashes Sin and Death upon the world, he who dreams the primal kiss that incestuously kills both "sister" and "mother." Doomed and filthy, is he not, then, Eve instead of Adam? In fact, may not the story of the fall be, for women, the story of the discovery that one is not innocent and Adam (as one had supposed) but Eve, and fallen? Perhaps this is what Freud's cruel but metaphorically accurate concept of penis-envy really means: the girl-child's surprised discovery that she is female, hence fallen, inadequate. Certainly the almost grotesquely anxious self-analysis implicit in Victor Frankenstein's (and Mary Shelley's) multiform relationships to Eve, Adam, God, and Satan suggest as much.

The discovery that one is fallen is in a sense a discovery that one is a monster, a murderer, a being gnawed by "the never-dying worm" (72, chap. 8) and therefore capable of any horror, including but not limited to sex, death, and filthy literary creation. More, the discovery that one is fallen—self-divided, murderous, material—is the discovery that one has released a "vampire" upon the world, "forced to destroy all that [is] dear" (61, chap. 7). For this reason—because Frankenstein is a story of woman's fall told by, as it were, an apparently docile daughter to a censorious "father"—the monster's narrative is embedded at the heart of the novel like the secret of the fall itself. Indeed, just as Frankenstein's workshop, with its maddening, riddling answers to cosmic questions is a hidden but commanding attic womb/room where the young artist-scientist murders to dissect and to recreate, so the murderous monster's single, carefully guarded narrative commands and controls Mary Shelley's novel. Delivered at the top of Mont Blanc—like the North Pole one of the Shelley family's metaphors for the indifferently powerful source of creation and destruction—it is the story of deformed Geraldine in "Christabel," the story of the dead-alive crew in "The Ancient Mariner," the story of Eve in Paradise Lost, and of her degraded double Sin—all secondary or female characters to whom male authors have imperiously denied any chance of self-explanation. At the same time the monster's narrative is a philosophical meditation on what it means to be born without a "soul" or a history, as well as an exploration of what it feels like to be a "filthy mass that move[s] and talk[s]," a thing, an other, a creature of the second sex. In fact, though it tends to be ignored by critics (and film-makers), whose emphasis has always fallen upon Frankenstein himself as the archetypal mad scientist, the drastic shift in point of view that the nameless
Like Victor Frankenstein, his author and superficially better self, the monster enacts in turn the roles of Adam and Satan, and even eventually hints at a sort of digression into the role of God. Like Adam, he recalls a time of primordial innocence, his days and nights in "the forest near Ingolstadt," where he ate berries, learned about heat and cold, and perceived "the boundaries of the radiant roof of light which canopied me" (88, chap. 11). Almost too quickly, however, he metamorphoses into an outcast and Satanic figure, hiding in a shepherd's hut which seems to him "as exquisite . . . a retreat as Pandemonium . . . after . . . the lake of fire" (90, chap. 11). Later, when he secretly sets up housekeeping behind the De Lacey's pigpen, his wistful observations of the loving though exiled family and their pastoral abode ("Happy, happy earth! Fit habitation for gods . . .") (100, chap. 12) recall Satan's mingled jealousy and admiration of that "happy rural seat of various view" where Adam and Eve are emparadised by God and Milton (PL 4. 247). Eventually, burning the cottage and murdering William in demonic rage, he seems to become entirely Satanic: "I, like the arch-fiend, bore a hell within me" (121, chap. 16); "Inflamed by pain, I vowed eternal hatred . . . to all mankind" (126, chap. 16). At the same time, in his assertion of power over his "author," his mental conception of another creature (a female monster), and his implicit dream of founding a new, vegetarian race somewhere in "the vast wilds of South America," (131, chap. 17), he temporarily enacts the part of a God, a creator, a master, albeit a failed one.

As the monster himself points out, however, each of these Miltonic roles is a Procrustean bed into which he simply cannot fit. Where, for instance, Victor Frankenstein's childhood really was Edenic, the monster's anxious infancy is isolated and ignorant, rather than insulated or innocent, so that his groping arrival at self-consciousness—"I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew and could distinguish nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept" (87-88, chap. 11)—is a fiercely subversive parody of Adam's exuberant "all things smil'd, / With fragrance and with joy my heart o'erflow'd. / Myself I then perus'd, and Limb by Limb / Survey'd, and sometimes went, and sometimes ran / With supple joints, as lively vigor led" (PL 8. 265-69). Similarly, the monster's attempts at speech ("Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again" (88, chap. 11) parody and subvert Adam's ("To speak I tri'd, and forthwith spake, / My Tongue obey'd and readily could name / Whate'er I saw" (PL 8. 271-72). And of course the monster's anxiety and confusion ("What was I? The question again recurred to be answered only with groans" [106, chap. 13]) are a dark version of Adam's wondering bliss ("who I was, or where, or from what cause, / [I] Knew not. . . . [But I] feel that I am happier than I know" (PL 8. 270-71, 282).

Similarly, though his uncontrollable rage, his alienation, even his enormous size and superhuman physical strength bring him closer to Satan than he was to Adam, the monster puzzles over discrepancies between his situation and the fallen angel's. Though he is, for example, "in bulk as huge / As whom the Fables name of monstrous size, / Titanian, or Earth-born, that warr'd on Jove," and though, indeed, he is fated to war like Prometheus on Jovean Frankenstein, this demon/monster has fallen from no heaven, exercised no power of choice, and been endowed with no companions in evil. "I found myself similar yet at the same time strangely unlike to the beings concerning whom I read and to whose conversation I was a listener," he tells Frankenstein, describing his schooldays in the De Lacey pigpen (113, chap. 15). And, interestingly, his remark might well have been made by Mary Shelley herself, that "devout but nearly silent listener" (xiv) to masculine conversations who, like her hideous progeny, "continually studied and exercised [her] mind upon" such "histories" as Paradise Lost, Plutarch's Lives, and The Sorrows of Werter (sic) "whilst [her] friends were employed in their ordinary occupations" (112, chap. 15).

In fact, it is his intellectual similarity to his authoress (rather than his "author") which first suggests that Victor Frankenstein's male monster may really be a female in disguise. Certainly the books which educate him—Werter, Plutarch's Lives, and Paradise Lost—are not only books Mary had herself read in 1815, the year before she wrote Frankenstein, but they also typify just the literary categories she thought it necessary to
study: the contemporary novel of sensibility, the serious history of Western civilization, and the highly cultivated epic poem. As specific works, moreover, each must have seemed to her to embody lessons a female author (or monster) must learn about a male-dominated society. Werter's story, says the monster—and he seems to be speaking for Mary Shelley—taught him about "gentle and domestic manners," and about "lofty sentiments . . . which had for their object something out of self." It functioned, in other words, as a sort of Romantic conduct book. In addition, it served as an introduction to the virtues of the proto-Byronic "Man of Feeling," for, admiring Werter and never mentioning Lotte, the monster explains to Victor that "I thought Werter himself a more divine being than I had ever . . . imagined," adding, in a line whose female irony about male self-dramatization must surely have been intentional, "I wept [his extinction] without precisely understanding it" (113, chap. 15).

If Werter introduces the monster to female modes of domesticity and self-abnegation, as well as to the unattainable glamour of male heroism, Plutarch's Lives teaches him all the masculine intricacies of that history which his anomalous birth has denied him. Mary Shelley, excluding herself from the household of the second Mrs. Godwin and studying family as well as literary history on her mother's grave, must, again, have found in her own experience an appropriate model for the plight of a monster who, as James Rieger notes, is especially characterized by "his unique knowledge of what it is like to be born free of history." In terms of the disguised story the novel tells, however, this monster is not unique at all, but representative, as Shelley may have suspected she herself was. For, as Jane Austen has Catherine Morland suggest in Northanger Abbey, what is woman but man without a history, at least without the sort of history related in Plutarch's Lives? "History, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in," Catherine declares "... the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all—it is very tiresome" (NA I, chap. 14).

But of course the third and most crucial book referred to in the miniature Bildungsroman of the monster's narrative is Paradise Lost, an epic myth of origins which is of major importance to him, as it is to Mary Shelley, precisely because, unlike Plutarch, it does provide him with what appears to be a personal history. And again, even the need for such a history draws Shelley's monster closer not only to the realistically ignorant female defined by Jane Austen but also to the archetypal female defined by John Milton. For, like the monster, like Catherine Morland, and like Mary Shelley herself, Eve is characterized by her "unique knowledge of what it is like to be born free of history," even though as the "Mother of Mankind" she is fated to "make" history. It is to Adam, after all, that God and His angels grant explanatory visions of past and future. At such moments of high historical colloquy Eve tends to excuse herself with "lowliness Majestic" (before the fall) or (after the fall) she is magically put to sleep, calmed like a frightened animal "with gentle Dreams . . . and all her spirits compos'd / To meek submission" (PL 12. 595-96).

Nevertheless, one of the most notable facts about the monster's ceaselessly anxious study of Paradise Lost is his failure even to mention Eve. As an insistently male monster, on the surface of his palimpsestic narrative he appears to be absorbed in Milton's epic only because, as Percy Shelley wrote in the preface to Frankenstein that he drafted for his wife, Paradise Lost "most especially" conveys "the truth of the elementary principles of human nature," and conveys that truth in the dynamic tensions developed among its male characters, Adam, Satan, and God (xvii). Yet not only the monster's uniquely ahistorical birth, his literary anxieties, and the sense his readings (like Mary's) foster that he must have been parented, if at all, by books; not only all these facts and traits but also his shuddering sense of deformity, his nauseating size, his namelessness, and his orphaned, motherless isolation link him with Eve and with Eve's double, Sin. Indeed, at several points in his impassioned analysis of Milton's story he seems almost on the verge of saying so, as he examines the disjunctions among Adam, Satan, and himself:

Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guided by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature, but I was
wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition, for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me. . . . Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him, but I am solitary and abhorred. [114-15, chap. 15]

It is Eve, after all, who languishes helpless and alone, while Adam converses with superior beings, and it is Eve in whom the Satanically bitter gall of envy rises, causing her to eat the apple in the hope of adding "what wants / In Female Sex." It is Eve, moreover, to whom deathly isolation is threatened should Adam reject her, an isolation more terrible even than Satan's alienation from heaven. And finally it is Eve whose body, like her mind, is said by Milton to resemble "less / His Image who made both, and less [to express] / The character of that Dominion giv'n / O'er other Creatures . . ." (PL 8. 543-46). In fact, to a sexually anxious reader, Eve's body might, like Sin's, seem "horrid even from [its] very resemblance" to her husband's, a "filthy" or obscene version of the human form divine.33

As we argued earlier, women have seen themselves (because they have been seen) as monstrous, vile, degraded creatures, second-comers, and emblems of filthy materiality, even though they have also been traditionally defined as superior spiritual beings, angels, better halves. "Woman [is] a temple built over a sewer," said the Church father Tertullian, and Milton seems to see Eve as both temple and sewer, echoing that patristic misogyny.34 Mary Shelley's conscious or unconscious awareness of the monster woman implicit in the angel woman is perhaps clearest in the revisionary scene where her monster, as if taking his cue from Eve in Paradise Lost book 4, first catches sight of his own image: "I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers . . . but how was I terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool. At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification" (98-99, chap. 12). In one sense, this is a corrective to Milton's blindness about Eve. Having been created second, inferior, a mere rib, how could she possibly, this passage implies, have seemed anything but monstrous to herself? In another sense, however, the scene supplements Milton's description of Eve's introduction to herself, for ironically, though her reflection in "the clear / Smooth Lake" is as beautiful as the monster's is ugly, the self-absorption that Eve's confessed passion for her own image signals is plainly meant by Milton to seem morally ugly, a hint of her potential for spiritual deformity: "There I had fixt / Mine eyes till now, and pin'd with vain desire, / Had not a voice thus warn'd me, What thou seest, / What there thou seest fair Creature is thyself . . ." (PL 4. 465-68).

The figurative monstrosity of female narcissism is a subtle deformity, however, in comparison with the literal monstrosity many women are taught to see as characteristic of their own bodies. Adrienne Rich's twentieth-century description of "a woman in the shape of a monster / A monster in the shape of a woman" is merely the latest in a long line of monstrous female self-definitions that includes the fearful images in Djuna Barnes's Book of Repulsive Women, Denise Levertov's "a white sweating bull of a poet told us / our cunts are ugly" and Sylvia Plath's "old yellow" self of the poem "In Plaster."35 Animal and misshapen, these emblems of self-loathing must have descended at least in part from the distended body of Mary Shelley's darkly parodic Eve/Sin/Monster, whose enormity betokens not only the enormity of Victor Frankenstein's crime and Satan's bulk but also the distentions or deformities of pregnancy and the Swiftian sexual nausea expressed in Lemuel Gulliver's horrified description of a Brobdignagian breast, a passage Mary Shelley no doubt studied along with the rest of Gulliver's Travels when she read the book in 1816, shortly before beginning Frankenstein.36

At the same time, just as surely as Eve's moral deformity is symbolized by the monster's physical malformation, the monster's physical ugliness represents his social illegitimacy, his bastardy, his namelessness. Bitchy and dastardly as Shakespeare's Edmund, whose association with filthy femaleness is
established not only by his devotion to the material/maternal goddess Nature but also by his interlocking affairs with those filthy females Goneril and Regan, Mary Shelley's monster has also been "got" in a "dark and vicious place." Indeed, in his vile illegitimacy he seems to incarnate that bestial "unnamable" place. And significantly, he is himself as nameless as a woman is in patriarchal society, as nameless as unmarried, illegitimately pregnant Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin may have felt herself to be at the time she wrote *Frankenstein*.

"This nameless mode of naming the unnameable is rather good," Mary commented when she learned that it was the custom at early dramatizations of *Frankenstein* to place a blank line next to the name of the actor who played the part of the monster. But her pleased surprise was disingenuous, for the problem of names and their connection with social legitimacy had been forced into her consciousness all her life. As the sister of illegitimate and therefore nameless Fanny Imlay, for instance, she knew what bastardy meant, and she knew it too as the mother of a premature and illegitimate baby girl who died at the age of two weeks without ever having been given a name. Of course, when Fanny dramatically excised her name from her suicide note Mary learned more about the significance even of insignificant names. And as the stepsister of Mary Jane Clairmont, who defined herself as the "creature" of Lord Byron and changed her name for a while with astonishing frequency (from Mary Jane to Jane to Clara to Claire), Mary knew about the importance of names too. Perhaps most of all, though, Mary's sense of the fearful significance of legitimate and illegitimate names must have been formed by her awareness that her own name, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, was absolutely identical with the name of the mother who had died in giving birth to her. Since this was so, she may have speculated, perhaps her own monstrosity, her murderous illegitimacy, consisted in her being—like Victor Frankenstein's creation—a reanimation of the dead, a sort of galvanized corpse ironically arisen from what should have been "the cradle of life."

This implicit fantasy of the reanimation of the dead in the monstrous and nameless body of the living returns us, however, to the matter of the monster's Satanic, Sin-ful and Eve-like moral deformity. For of course the crimes that the monster commits once he has accepted the world's definition of him as little more than a namelessly "filthy mass" all reinforce his connection with Milton's unholy trinity of Sin, Eve/Satan, and Death. The child of two authors (Victor Frankenstein and Mary Shelley) whose mothers have been stolen away by death, this motherless monster is after all made from dead bodies, from loathsome parts found around cemeteries, so that it seems only "natural" for him to continue the Blakeian cycle of despair his birth began, by bringing further death into the world. And of course he brings death, in the central actions of the novel: death to the childish innocence of little William (whose name is that of Mary Shelley's father, her half-brother, and her son, so that one can hardly decide to which male relative she may have been alluding); death to the faith and truth of allegorically named Justine; death to the legitimate artistry of the Shelleyan poet Clerval; and death to the ladylike selflessness of angelic Elizabeth. Is he acting, in his vile way, for Mary Shelley, whose elegant femininity seemed, in view of her books, so incongruous to the poet Beddoes and to literary Lord Dillon? "She has no business to be a woman by her books," noted Beddoes. And "your writing and your manners are not in accordance," Dillon told Mary herself. "I should have thought of you—if I had only read you—that you were a sort of . . . Sybil, outpouringly enthusiastic . . . but you are cool, quiet and feminine to the last degree. . . . Explain this to me."

Could Mary's coolness have been made possible by the heat of her monster's rage, the strain of her decorous silence eased by the demonic abandon of her nameless monster's ritual fire dance around the cottage of his rejecting "Protectors"? Does Mary's cadaverous creature want to bring more death into the world because he has failed—like those other awful females, Eve and Sin—to win the compassion of that blind and curiously Miltonic old man, the Godlike musical patriarch De Lacey? Significantly, he is clinging to the blind man's knees, begging for recognition and help—"Do not you desert me in the hour of trial!"—when Felix, the son of the house, appears like the felicitous hero he is, and, says the monster, "with supernatural force [he] tore me from his father . . . in a transport of fury, he dashed me to the ground and struck me violently with a stick . . . my heart sank within me as with bitter sickness" (119, chap. 15). Despite everything we have been told about
the monster's physical vileness, Felix's rage seems excessive in terms of the novel's overt story. But as an action in the covert plot—the tale of the blind rejection of women by misogynistic/Miltonic patriarchy—it is inevitable and appropriate. Even more psychologically appropriate is the fact that having been so definitively rejected by a world of fathers, the monster takes his revenge, first by murdering William, a male child who invokes his father's name ("My papa is a syndic—he is M. Frankenstein—he will punish you") and then by beginning a doomed search for a maternal, female principle in the harsh society that has created him.

In this connection, it begins to be plain that Eve's—and the monster's—motherlessness must have had extraordinary cultural and personal significance for Mary Shelley. "We think back through our mothers if we are women," wrote Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*. But of course one of the most dramatic emblems of Eve's alienation from the masculine garden in which she finds herself is her motherlessness. Because she is made in the image of a man who is himself made in the image of a male creator, her unprecedented femininity seems merely a defective masculinity, a deformity like the monster's inhuman body. In fact, as we saw, the only maternal model in *Paradise Lost* is the terrifying figure of Sin. (That Eve's punishment for her sin is the doom of agonized maternity—the doom of painfully becoming no longer herself but "Mother of Human Race"—appears therefore to seal the grim parallel.) But all these powerful symbols would be bound to take on personal weight and darkness for Shelley, whose only real "mother" was a tombstone—or a shelf of books—and who, like all orphans, must have feared that she had been deliberately deserted by her dead parent, or that, if she was a monster, then her hidden, underground mother must have been one too.

For all these reasons, then, the monster's attitude toward the possibility (or impossibility) of finding a mother is unusually conflicted and complex. At first, horrified by what he knows of the only "mother" he has ever had—Victor Frankenstein—he regards his parentage with loathing. Characteristically, he learns the specific details of his "conception" and "birth" (as Mary Shelley may have learned of hers) through reading, for Victor has kept a journal which records "that series of disgusting circumstances" leading "to the production of [the monster's] . . . loathsome person." Later, however, the ill-fated miniature of Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein, Victor's "angel mother," momentarily "attract[s]" him. In fact, he claims it is because he is "forever deprived of the delights that such beautiful creatures could bestow" that he resolves to implicate Justine in the murder of William. His reproachful explanation is curious, though ("The crime had its source in her; be hers the punishment"), as is the sinister rape fantasy he enacts by the side of the sleeping orphan ("Awake, fairest, thy lover is near—he who would give his life but to obtain one look of affection from thine eyes" [127-28, chap. 16]). Clearly feelings of rage, terror, and sexual nausea, as well as idealizing sentiments, accrete for Mary and the monster around the maternal female image, a fact which explains the later climactic wedding-night murder of apparently innocent Elizabeth. In this fierce, Miltonic world, *Frankenstein* says, the angel woman and the monster woman alike must die, if they are not dead already. And what is to be feared above all else is the reanimation of the dead, specifically of the maternal dead. Perhaps that is why a significant pun is embedded in the crucial birth scene ("It was on a dreary night of November") that, according to Mary Shelley, rose "unbidden" from her imagination. Looking at the "demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life," Victor remarks that "A mummy again endowed with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch" (43, chap. 5). For a similarly horrific (and equally punning) statement of sexual nausea, one would have to go back to Donne's "Loves Alchymie" with its urgent, misogynistic imperative: "Hope not for minde in women; at their best / Sweetnesse and wit, they are but / Mummy possest."

Interestingly, the literary group at Villa Diodati received a packet of books containing, among other poems, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's recently published "Christabel," shortly before Mary had her monster-dream and began her ghost story. More influential than "Loves Alchymie"—a poem Mary may or may not have read—"Christabel"s vision of femaleness must have been embodied for the author of *Frankenstein* not only in the witch Geraldine's withered side and consequent self-loathing ("Ah! What a stricken look was hers!") but also in her anxiety about the ghost of Christabel's dead mother ("Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine!") and in Christabel's "Woe is me / She died the hour that I was born." But even without Donne's puns or Coleridge's
Romanticized male definition of deathly maternity, Mary Shelley would have absorbed a keen sense of the agony of female sexuality, and specifically of the perils of motherhood, not just from Paradise Lost and from her own mother's fearfully exemplary fate but also from Wollstonecraft's almost prophetically anxious writings.

Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman (1797), which Mary read in 1814 (and possibly in 1815) is about, among other "wrongs," Maria's search for her lost child, her fears that "she" (for the fantasied child is a daughter) may have been murdered by her unscrupulous father, and her attempts to reconcile herself to the child's death. In a suicide scene that Wollstonecraft drafted shortly before her own death, as her daughter must have known, Maria swallows laudanum: "her soul was calm . . . nothing remained but an eager longing . . . to fly . . . from this hell of disappointment. Still her eyes closed not . . . Her murdered child again appeared to her . . . [But] 'Surely it is better to die with me, than to enter on life without a mother's care!'" 42 Plainly, Frankenstein's pained ambivalence toward mothers and mummies is in some sense a response to Maria's agonized reaching—from beyond the grave, it may have seemed—toward a daughter. "Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine!" It is no wonder if Coleridge's poem gave Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley bad dreams, no wonder if she saw Milton's "Mother of Human Race" as a sorrowful monster.

Though Frankenstein itself began with a Coleridgean and Miltonic nightmare of filthy creation that reached its nadir in the monster's revelation of filthy femaleness, Mary Shelley, like Victor Frankenstein himself, evidently needed to distance such monstrous secrets. Sinful, motherless Eve and sinned-against, daughterless Maria, both paradigms of woman's helpless alienation in a male society, briefly emerge from the sea of male heroes and villains in which they have almost been lost, but the ice soon closes over their heads again, just as it closes around those two insane figure-skaters, Victor Frankenstein and his hideous offspring. Moving outward from the central "birth myth" to the icy perimeter on which the novel began, we find ourselves caught up once more in Walton's naïve polar journey, where Frankenstein and his monster reappear as two embattled grotesques, distant and archetypal figures solipsistically drifting away from each other on separate icebergs. In Walton's scheme of things, they look again like God and Adam, Satanically conceived. But now, with our more nearly complete understanding of the bewildered and bewildering perspective Mary Shelley adopted as "Milton's daughter," we see that they were Eve and Eve all along.

Nevertheless, though Shelley did manage to still the monster's suffering and Frankenstein's and her own by transporting all three from the fires of filthy creation back to the ice and silence of the Pole, she was never entirely to abandon the sublimated rage her monster-self enacted, and never to abandon, either, the metaphysical ambitions Frankenstein incarnated. In The Last Man she introduced, as Spark points out, "a new, inhuman protagonist," PLAGUE (the name is almost always spelled entirely in capitals), who is characterized as female and who sees to it that "disaster is no longer the property of the individual but of the entire human race." 43 And of course PLAGUE'S story is the one that Mary claims to have found in the Sibyl's cave, a tale of a literally female monster that was merely foreshadowed by the more subdued narrative of "The Modern Prometheus."

Interestingly, PLAGUE'S story ends with a vision of last things, a vision of judgment and of paradise nihilistically restored that balances Frankenstein's vision of first things. With all of humanity wiped out by the monster PLAGUE, just as the entire Frankenstein family was destroyed by Victor's monster, Lionel Verney, the narrator, goes to Rome, that cradle of patriarchal civilization whose ruins had seemed so majestically emblematic to both Byron and Shelley. But where Mary's husband had written of the great city in a kind of ecstasy, his widow has her disinherited "last man" wander lawlessly about empty Rome until finally he resolves, finding "parts of a manuscript . . . scattered about," that "I also will write a book . . . [but] for whom to read?—to whom dedicated? And then with silly flourish (what so capricious and childish as despair?) I wrote,
DEDICATION
TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD
SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL
BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE LAST MAN.

44

His hostile, ironic, literary gesture illuminates not only his own career but his author's. For the annihilation of
history may well be the final revenge of the monster who has been denied a true place in history: the moral is
one that Mary Shelley's first hideous progeny, like Milton's Eve, seems to have understood from the
beginning.

Notes


15 Author's introduction to Frankenstein (1817; Toronto, New York, London: Bantam Pathfinder Edition,
1967), p. xi. Hereafter page references to this edition will follow quotations, and we will also include chapter
references for those using other editions. For a basic discussion of the "family romance" of literature, see
Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence.


17 Moers, Literary Women, pp. 95-97.

18 See Ralph Wardle, Mary Wollstonecraft (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1951), p. 322, for
more detailed discussion of these attacks on Wollstonecraft.


20 See Mary Shelley's Journal, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1947),
esp. pp. 32-33, 47-49, 71-73, and 88-90, for the reading lists themselves. Besides reading Wollstonecraft's
Maria, her Vindication of the Rights of Women, and three or four other books, together with Godwin's
Political Justice and his Caleb Williams, Mary Shelley also read parodies and criticisms of her parents' works
in these years, including a book she calls Anti-Jacobin Poetry, which may well have included that periodical's
vicious attack on Wollstonecraft. To read, for her, was not just to read her family, but to read about her
family.

21 Marc A. Rubenstein suggests that throughout the novel "the act of observation, passive in one sense,
becomes covertly and symbolically active in another: the observed scene becomes an enclosing, even
womb-like container in which a story is variously developed, preserved, and passed on. Storytelling becomes
a vicarious pregnancy." "My Accursed Origin: The Search for the Mother in Frankenstein," Studies in
Romanticism 15, no. 2 (Spring 1976): 173.

22 See Anne Finch, "The Introduction," in The Poems of Anne Countess of Winchilsea, pp. 4-6, and Sylvia

23 Speaking of the hyperborean metaphor in Frankenstein, Rubenstein argues that Walton (and Mary Shelley)
seek "the fantasied mother locked within the ice . . . the maternal Paradise beyond the frozen north," and asks
us to consider the pun implicit in the later meeting of Frankenstein and his monster on the mer (or Mère) de
Glace at Chamonix (Rubenstein "My Accursed Origin," pp. 175-76).

24 See Moers, Literary Women, pp. 99.

25 In that summer of 1816 Byron had in fact just fled England in an attempt to escape the repercussions of his scandalous affair with his half-sister Augusta Leigh, the real-life "Astarte."

26 Matthew Arnold, "Preface" to Poems, 1853.

27 Spark, Child of Light, p. 134.

28 See Moers, Literary Women, "Female Gothic"; also Rubenstein, "My Accursed Origin," pp. 165-166.

29 The OED gives "obscenity" and "moral defilement" among its definitions of "filth."

30 The monster's narrative also strikingly echoes Jemima's narrative in Mary Wollstonecraft's posthumously published novel, Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman. See Maria (1798; rpt. New York: Norton, 1975), pp. 52-69.

31 Harold Bloom does note that "the monster is . . . Mary Shelley's finest invention, and his narrative . . . forms the highest achievement of the novel." ("Afterword" to Frankenstein, p. 219.)


33 In Western culture the notion that femaleness is a deformity or obscenity can be traced back at least as far as Aristotle, who asserted that "we should look upon the female state as being as it were a deformity, though one which occurs in the ordinary course of nature." (The Generation of Animals, trans. A. L. Peck [London: Heinemann, 1943], p. 461.) For a brief but illuminating discussion of his theories see Katharine M. Rogers, The Troublesome Helpmate.

34 See de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, p. 156.


36 See Mary Shelley's Journal, p. 73.


38 See Spark, Child of Light, pp. 192-93.

39 Woolf, A Room, p. 79.

40 In "The Deluge at Norderney," Isak Dinesen tells the story of Calypso, niece of Count Seraphina Von Platen, a philosopher who "disliked and mistrusted everything female" and whose "idea of paradise was . . . a long row of lovely young boys . . . singing his poems to his music." "Annihilated" by her uncle's misogyny, Calypso plans to chop off her own breasts with a "sharp hatchet." See Seven Gothic Tales, pp. 43-51.
Marc Rubenstein speculates that as a girl Shelley may actually have read (and been affected by) the correspondence that passed between her parents around the time that she was conceived.

Maria, p. 152.

Spark, Child of Light, p. 205.

The Last Man, p. 339.

**Analysis**

The structure of *Frankenstein* is epistolary, a popular novel framework in the nineteenth century that might be unfamiliar to contemporary readers. The story consists of letters from Robert Walton to his sister, Margaret Saville. At first, they contain incidents of his own Arctic exploration and reveal him as a man obsessed with a “love for the marvellous” that lures him from mundane pursuits that would anchor him to humanity. When he encounters Victor Frankenstein, the epistolary framework dissolves, and Victor tells his tale in the first person.

Growing up in a wealthy Geneva household, Victor passes a happy childhood in the company of Elizabeth Lavenza and Henry Clerval. At seventeen, he enters the University of Ingolstadt in Germany, where he is determined to discover the origin of life. He succeeds in animating a piecework human body, but he is horrified and flees from the creature that he has fashioned. Two years later, after he receives news that his brother William has been murdered, Victor sees the monster and intuitively knows him to be the murderer. Victor remains silent even though Justine Moritz is convicted of the crime and executed. Later, he meets the monster on Mt. Montanvert and listens to his story.

Having found shelter in a hovel attached to a cottage inhabited by the DeLacey family, the monster learned to speak. When the DeLaceys took in Safie, an Arab woman whom they had known in wealthier and happier days in Paris, they taught her to read, and the monster followed the lessons along with her. He had Victor Frankenstein’s journal and so learned of his creator. He also read John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674) and identified with Satan, who was rejected by his creator and who seeks revenge by making war on humanity. Rejected by the DeLaceys when he revealed himself to them, the monster decided to travel to Geneva to find his creator. He murdered William when the latter feared and rejected him.

The monster explains to Victor that he is malicious only because he is isolated and miserable, and he persuades Victor to make him a mate. Victor goes to Scotland with Henry Clerval with this purpose in mind, only to destroy his half-finished female as the monster looks on. The monster retaliates by killing Clerval and by strangling Victor’s wife, Elizabeth, on their wedding night. Victor vows to pursue the creature relentlessly, as obsessed about killing him as he was about creating him. As his tale ends, the novel resumes its epistolary framework.

Walton relates the death of Victor Frankenstein. When he himself encounters the monster, he does not kill him as Victor requested but listens to the story from his perspective. The monster depicts himself as loving Victor and suffering deeply from remorse. He claims that he was created to be susceptible to love and sympathy and was wrenched apart when offered only misunderstanding, rejection, and violence. Promising to end his own life, the monster leaves Walton to ponder the meaning of the events that he has heard.
Analysis: The Plot

*Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus* is framed as a series of letters written by polar explorer Robert Walton to his sister, Margaret Saville, who is home in England. He relates to her his adventures, including a story told to him by a young man, Victor Frankenstein, whom his ship has rescued from the polar ice.

As a young university student at Ingolstadt, in Bavaria, Frankenstein is determined to find the secret of life. He studies constantly, ignoring his family back in Geneva, Switzerland. He steals body parts from charnel houses and medical laboratories, then uses the power of electricity to create a living being. He immediately knows he has erred: His creature is ghastly. It leaves Frankenstein’s quarters, but not his life.

Frankenstein next sees the creature back in Geneva, where he has returned following the death of his young brother William. Although a servant girl, Justine, is accused of causing William’s death, Frankenstein sees the creature lurking near the place of the murder and knows he is the killer. Frankenstein’s anguish is intensified when innocent Justine is executed for the murder. In his agony, Frankenstein leaves home to wander in the mountains. The creature confronts him and tells him his own story.

After leaving Ingolstadt, the creature wandered throughout the countryside. He discovered quickly that he was frightening and repugnant to humans and took to traveling at night and hiding during the day. The creature learned to speak and to read during a long stay in a hovel attached to a poor farm family’s hut. During his stay, he performed many kindnesses for the family and felt sympathy for their poverty. He befriended the old father, who was blind. As soon as other family members returned and saw him, they fled. In anger, the creature set their farm on fire.

He made his way to Geneva, saving a small child from drowning along the way. Every time he tried to perform an act of kindness, however, he caused a reaction of horror. On the mountaintop, the creature begs Frankenstein to make him a mate so he need not be lonely. Then, he says, he will leave humankind alone and live with his mate in seclusion. If not, he says, he will be with Frankenstein on his wedding night.

Frankenstein promises to make him a mate but questions his wisdom. He travels to England with his friend William Clerval, then goes alone to an isolated spot in Scotland to carry out his promise.

He cannot finish the job. He abandons it and prepares to return home. The creature, infuriated by Frankenstein’s unwillingness to keep a promise, kills Clerval, then returns to Geneva to kill Frankenstein’s bride, his adopted sister Elizabeth, on their wedding night.

The tragedy and the guilt are too much to bear. Frankenstein resolves to pursue the monster until one of them is dead. He travels by dogsled across the snowy expanses of Russia toward the North Pole. He is picked up by Robert Walton’s ship during his pursuit and dies on the ship after telling Walton his story. The creature appears and tells Walton of his remorse for his deeds, then sets off into the cold to build his own funeral pyre.

Analysis: Places Discussed

*Arctic Circle*

*Arctic Circle. Frankenstein* is told at a great distance, both physically and psychologically. The epistolary novel opens with letters from Robert Walton to his sister in England. Walton is on an exploring expedition to the far north, and his letters are dated from locations farther and farther north, starting with St. Petersburg, Russia, then Archangel, then unspecified locations, as Walton passes into unexplored territory. When his ship is surrounded by fog and ice floes, his crew sees Victor Frankenstein crossing the ice with a dog sled. They
rescue him; Frankenstein tells his story. Before he does so, however, Frankenstein indicates that the desire to find the North Pole is as dangerous as his inquiry into unknown scientific regions, asking Walton, “Unhappy man! Do you share my madness?” When Frankenstein’s story is complete, he dies. His monstrous creation, after finally forgiving him, flees across the polar sea and out of human knowledge.

*Geneva*

*Geneva*. City in western Switzerland that is home to Victor Frankenstein, who describes it lovingly, speaking of its “majestic and wondrous scenes” and the “sublime shapes of the mountains.” The countryside is described more fully than the city, but enough details are given to indicate that Shelley knew Geneva well. While Shelley was staying near Lake Geneva with her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron, and other friends, they had a competition for the best ghost story. Shelley said the core idea for *Frankenstein* came to her then, in a dream. Visiting or leaving Geneva has powerful consequences for the characters in the novel. After they met, Frankenstein’s father and mother moved to Geneva. When Victor was five, his father went to Milan, and returned with Elizabeth, the lifetime friend and nearly sister to Victor whom he marries.

When Victor returns to Geneva, everything seems to be different. His creation’s presence transforms his home, which earlier seemed to be a paradise, into a place of pain and chaos. Victor’s brother William is killed, and a life-long family servant is sentenced to death. Late in the novel, Victor returns to Geneva for the last time to marry Elizabeth. When his creation kills Elizabeth on their wedding night, the transformation of Geneva into a hell on earth is complete.

*Ingolstadt*

*Ingolstadt*. City in Bavaria, Germany, where Victor Frankenstein entered the University of Ingolstadt when he was seventeen and to which he returns in later years. The university had a great deal of autonomy during the seventeenth century, and was known for its support of Enlightenment rationality. Few specifics are given about Ingolstadt itself. Frankenstein studies there and escapes the stabilizing influence of his family but connects only with his professors, not with a community or place. There he learns modern chemistry from his professor Monsieur Waldman, which he blends with his earlier knowledge of alchemy to create life. Once he does, Ingolstadt becomes essentially haunted; Victor wanders its streets, afraid of his creature. Only the arrival of Henry Clerval, his old friend from Geneva, calms him.

*Mont Blanc*

*Mont Blanc*. Highest mountain in the Alps, to which Victor retreats when he is upset by the thought that his creation has caused the deaths of William and Justine. While gazing upon the awful beauty of Mont Blanc, he speaks aloud to the spirit of the place, which seems so pure. His creation answers, indicating that no place is free of the taint Frankenstein his created. The mountain’s glacier becomes a courtroom of natural philosophy as the creature accuses Victor of defaulting on his responsibilities as creator.

*Cottage*

Cottage. Home of a poor family in which the creature observes human interaction. When the creature tells the story of his life since his creation, the cottage where he observes a family, is central to it. He learns to speak by listening to the cottage’s inhabitants, and from them he learns about the possibility of love. Before this time, he is ignorant as an animal, but now, he becomes a tortured soul. Observing the small society in the cottage brings him close enough to humanity to realize what he is denied.

*London*
*London. Capital of Great Britain to which Victor Frankenstein goes to investigate another scientist’s discoveries before he can meet the creature’s demand that he make him a woman to be his companion. In London, Victor establishes a lab, and begins work, but he and Clerval also travel throughout England and Scotland. Their travels are idyllic, but everywhere they go, Victor is sure the creature follows him.

*Scotland

*Scotland. Country to which Victor goes to continue his work because it is farther from civilization. There he works on a mate for the creature then reconsiders and destroys it. The creature appears at that moment, confirming Victor’s fears that he has been followed. When Victor tries to sail home, he gets lost at sea and almost dies, symbolizing the danger inherent in his unchecked scientific explorations.

*Ireland

*Ireland. Country in which Victor is arrested for the murder of his friend Clerval, whom the monster has killed, after he lands there and goes ashore to ask for directions. While he is jailed in Ireland, he falls into a guilty fever for months. His imprisonment in this remote land confirms his growing fear that there is no place to which he can go to escape responsibility for his actions.

**Analysis: Form and Content**

_Frankenstein_ is, in many ways, a tale of mixed identities. Thus it seems somehow fitting that tradition has always linked the name of Frankenstein with a monstrous being rather than with the mad scientist who created him. Yet in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s novel, the original version of this popular story, Frankenstein is that scientist, and only on a symbolic level does the reader confuse him with his horrible creation. This is not the only pair of linked identities in the novel. The monster, as he is called here, serves as a kind of alter ego to each of the novel’s main characters—and even, finally, to its author. Shelley seems to sympathize more fully with the monster than with any other character.

Shelley structures the story like a Russian nesting doll: It is really a story within a story within a story. Robert Walton opens the tale, writing letters home to his sister as he embarks on a fantastic voyage of Arctic exploration. He hungers for a friend, a like-minded companion. Then, in his fourth letter, he describes how he has found a man out wandering on the ice, weak from exposure and malnourishment, and taken him into his ship. He sees in him the potential friend for whom he has longed. The man is Victor Frankenstein, and Walton lets him speak.

Victor recounts the story of his life, starting with his privileged childhood in Geneva, Switzerland. From an early age, he was obsessed with creating life. All science was, to him, the body of knowledge that gave human beings godlike powers. The intensity with which he pursued his studies made it nearly impossible for him to maintain closeness to his family and friends. His dear friend Henry Clerval did not see the danger in his studies. Elizabeth, his sister by informal adoption and eventually his betrothed, saw that his work was driving him to poor health and estranging him from his family, but she was powerless to bring him home.

After years of nearly frenzied study, Victor was ready. Robbing body parts from graves, he constructed a monstrous form. Finally, one stormy October night, he brought it to life. Yet when he saw his creature reaching out toward him, trying to smile, Victor rushed from the building, unable to take on the creature as his own charge. By the time he returned to his rooms the next day, accompanied by Clerval, the monster was gone. Victor became feverish, and Clerval nursed him back to health over some months.
When Victor returned home to his family and to Elizabeth, he was greeted by news that brought his feelings of dread into painful focus: His younger brother William had been found murdered. Authorities had arrested Justine Moritz, a beloved and trusted young servant, on circumstantial evidence. Victor, walking mournfully on Mont Blanc one stormy night, saw the monster’s form suddenly illuminated by a flash of lightning on a far peak, and he understood: The monster had killed his brother. Later, in agony, he watched as Justine was convicted and executed for the crime. Another stormy night in the mountains, the monster approached Victor closely enough for them to converse and begged him to hear his story. Victor agreed.

At this point, the monster becomes the narrator, as the reader hears how he told his own, very different life story. He told of eking out a miserable existence, of terrifying everyone who saw him, and of learning to hide, watch, and listen. He told of finding a kind of shed attached to a hut occupied by a family; from them, listening through the cracks in the wall, he learned to speak and to read. He told of reading John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and other books, and of coming to understand the intense pain of his solitude. Finally, he asked Victor to create a partner for him and promised to leave him alone forever if he would.

Victor agreed to create a mate for the monster but found himself unable to follow through with it. For the rest of the novel, he tells how he and the monster engaged in a deadly cat-and-mouse game. First the monster killed Clerval. Then Victor believed that the monster was hunting him but learned on his wedding night that he was to suffer rather than die: The monster killed his beloved Elizabeth on the bridal bed. Victor then pursued him to the Arctic wasteland in which Walton has found him.

As Victor finishes his tale, he warns Walton to learn from his example—and then he dies. At that moment, the monster enters, mourns the loss of his creator, and announces his own imminent suicide by self-immolation. He then vanishes into the darkness.

**Analysis: Context**

The revival of scholarly interest in *Frankenstein* has directly paralleled the emergence and development of feminist literary scholarship. On the one hand, Shelley’s novel has perhaps been an obvious subject of study for those who investigate the separate tradition of literature by women. On the other hand, *Frankenstein* anticipated and provided many of the concerns that feminist scholars would have. It expresses the rage and pain felt by those who are left out, who are not allowed a full place in their own culture.

Mary Shelley tells the reader that she felt some pressure to be a writer: Both her parents, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, were celebrated writers, and it was expected that she would continue the tradition. Yet her introduction is full of apologies for her work, and one sees everywhere the marks of difficulties she had being taken seriously. Not the least of these is the preface that was written by Percy Shelley in her voice, in which he acknowledges that the “humble novelist” needs to explain why she might aspire to the heights of great poetry. *Frankenstein* represents, symbolically, both some of the pressures on a woman writer and her critique of the culture that has created her but sees her as its “monster.”

The female characters in Shelley’s novel do not offer any kind of model response to the failures enacted by the males. Only in the novel’s symbolic vocabulary, in its acts of violence and its sympathies for the most hideous of creatures, do readers find a program for change. This work by a woman in a “feminine” genre—the gothic novel—is complex enough to provide generations of readers and scholars with puzzles to unravel. On the whole, it is not Mary Shelley’s prose that readers have admired; in any case, scholars are not sure how much of it is hers and how much Percy Shelley’s, since he went over it and rewrote many of its sentences. The power of this novel lies in its plot and in its central characters, the monster and his creator. Here is Pygmalion with a vengeance—and written by a woman.
**Analysis: Historical Context**

**The French Revolution and the Rise of Industrialism**

Most of the early Romantic waters strongly advocated the French Revolution, which began in 1789 with the storming of the Bastille, a prison where the French royalty kept political prisoners. The revolution signaled a throwing off of old traditions and customs of the wealthy classes, as the balance of economic power shifted toward the middle class with the rise of industrialism. As textile factories and iron mills increased production with advanced machinery and technology, the working classes grew restive and increasingly alarmed by jobs that seemed insecure because a worker could be replaced by machines. Most of England's literary thinkers welcomed revolution because it represented an opportunity to establish a harmonious social structure. Shelley's father William Godwin, in fact, strongly influenced Romantic writers when he wrote *Inquiry Concerning Political Justice* because he envisioned a society in which property would be equally distributed. Shelley's mother Mary Wollstonecraft, also an ardent supporter of the revolution, wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in response to Edmund Burke's attack on the revolution. She followed two years later with *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, supporting equality between the sexes.

The bloody "September Massacres" in which French revolutionaries executed nearly 1200 priests, royalists, aristocrats, and common criminals, occurred in 1792. This event and the "Reign of Terror," during which the revolutionary government imprisoned over 300,000 "suspects," made English sympathizers lose their fervor. With the rise of Napoleon, who was crowned emperor in 1804, England itself was drawn into war against France during this time. After the war ended in 1815, the English turned their attention to economic and social problems plaguing their own country. Much of the reason why England did not regulate the economic shift from a farming-based society to an industrialized society stemmed from a hands-off philosophy of non-governmental interference with private business. This philosophy had profound effects, leading to extremely low wages and terrible working conditions for employees who were prevented by law from unionizing.

**Science and Technology**

Eventually, the working class protested their conditions with violent measures. Around 1811, a period of unemployment, low wages, and high prices led to the Luddite Movement. This movement encouraged people to sabotage the technology and machinery that took jobs away from workers. Because the new machines produced an unparalleled production rate, competition for jobs was fierce, and employers used the low employment rate against their workers by not providing decent wages or working conditions. In addition to technological advances and new machines such as the steam engine, scientific advancements influenced the Romantic period. The most significant scientist was Erasmus Darwin, a noted physician, poet, and scholar whose ideas concerning biological evolution prefigured those of his more famous grandson, Charles Darwin. Both Mary and Percy were very familiar with his description of biological evolution, which became one of the central topics at the poet Lord Byron's home when Shelley conceived her idea for *Frankenstein*. Percy and Mary also attended a lecture by Andrew Crosse, a British scientist whose experiments with electricity bore some resemblance to Frankenstein's fascinations. Crosse discussed galvanism, or the study of electricity and its applications. This lecture no doubt fueled Shelley's imagination enough for her to suggest Victor Frankenstein's step-by-step invention of the creature in her novel.

**Arctic Exploration**

The late 1700s also marked the beginnings of a new era of ocean exploration. England's Royal Academy, which promoted the first voyage to the South seas, appealed to scientists and travelers alike. Explorers eventually wanted to find a trade route through the Arctic that would connect the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. In 1818, the year that Shelley published *Frankenstein*, a Scottish explorer named John Ross went searching for the Northwest passage and discovered an eight mile expanse of red-colored snow cliffs overlooking Baffin Bay, between Greenland and Canada. His journey reflected Walton's quest to the North.
pole and the era of discovery in which Shelley lived.

**Analysis: Literary Techniques**

Shelley uses an important literary technique — the story-within-a-story-within-a-story. Walton tells the whole story of Frankenstein and his monster as related to him by Frankenstein, with the addition of his own meeting with the monster after Frankenstein's death within the context of his Arctic exploration. Within Frankenstein's account is the monster's own tale of what he did after fleeing from Frankenstein: How he watched the De Llaceys and came to understand human speech, emotion, and history. Each of the stories presents comparisons and contrasts to the others. For example, Walton's exploration of the Arctic is a scientific discovery similar to Frankenstein's creation of the monster, but Walton's expedition fails when his men force him to turn back, whereas Frankenstein does succeed in creating the monster, although the results are questionable.

In addition to having the stories play off one another, Shelley uses the characters to play off one another. Walton, for instance, feels much sympathy for Frankenstein but resembles the monster. He, too, longs for companionship — he has "no friend ... no one to participate [in] my joy ... to sustain me in dejection." When Frankenstein dies, Walton loses both his dreams of friendship and his dream of discovery.

In a tale of a murderous and revengeful monster, there are, of course, scenes of violence and terror: three murders, an execution, and a cottage burned by arson, as well as three more deaths. Like classical Greek dramatists, Shelley to some extent mitigates the horror of these scenes by having the violence take place "offstage." That is, she never directly presents the monster strangling his victims. In each case she describes how the body is found and the sorrow the family members, friends, and community feel at the death. She emphasizes the grief rather than the grisly details of the murder or the horrible condition of the body. In no sense does she linger over gory details. The monster's victims are all innocent. If the monster had killed only his creator for cruelly abandoning him, the reader's judgment of the monster might be less harsh. The impact of the violence is further diminished because Frankenstein is reporting to Walton each murder long after the deed was done.

**Analysis: Ideas for Group Discussions**

Approaches to discussing *Frankenstein* are numerous. It can be looked at by itself as a work of literary art. Note the imagery and how it is used to enhance mood while also serving to symbolize the emotions of the characters. Are the characters well developed, or does the novel emphasize plot to the detriment of characterization? The novel can be looked at in its historical context. How does it represent Romanticism? Is it a critique of the science of its day? The universal qualities of the novel also invited comment. Is its indictment of scientific arrogance valid? Does it capture anything important about humanity's quest for knowledge? Do the characters represent anything universal about the human condition. Another interesting approach to the novel would be to see how its story has evolved in the adaptations of others. What about the Frankenstein story has captivated several generations of readers? Why do audiences still respond to the old story? How do the adaptations reflect the interests of their audiences? What is it about the novel that inspires adaptations and sequels?

1. Why is the novel subtitled *The Modern Prometheus*?
2. Why does Frankenstein create such a large, ugly monster rather than a normal-sized, good-looking man?
3. Why does Frankenstein not make a mate for the monster?
4. Why, initially, does Frankenstein hate his creature?
5. What is the purpose of the De Lacey interlude? How does it relate to the novel as a whole?

6. What conclusion does the monster reach about mankind after hearing Volney's "Ruins of Empires" and reading Goethe, Plutarch, and Milton?

7. Why do people sometimes refer to the monster as Frankenstein while in the novel he is unnamed?

8. Why does the monster kill Elizabeth?

9. In what ways is Frankenstein the "brother" of Walton's "heart"?

10. How is knowledge dangerous in Frankenstein?

11. Why does the monster keep leaving clues for Frankenstein to follow him?

12. How does the popular conception of Frankenstein's monster now differ from the monster Shelley describes in Frankenstein? Why has this change come about? Why is Shelley's version still worth reading?

13. How does the novel's structure add to the novel's effectiveness?

14. The monster describes himself as being like both Adam and Satan. Compare and contrast these figures. Do we finally think of the monster as a degraded, noble creature or as a diabolical fiend?

15. In Chapter 5, Frankenstein quotes some lines from Coleridge's poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Compare Frankenstein to the mariner.

16. Explain how the characters work as foils to and images of each other (Frankenstein the monster, Elizabeth-Walton-Clerval).

17. What is nature like in Frankenstein? Is it a force for good or evil?

18. Frankenstein's dying words to Walton are, "Seek happiness in tranquility and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in my hopes, yet another may succeed." Why does Shelley close her novel with these lines? How does she feel about scientific discovery?

**Analysis: Setting**

The setting of the novel ranges all over Europe, emphasizing places with which Shelley herself was familiar: Italy, Switzerland, Germany, France, England, Scotland, Ireland, and even the Arctic. The tale begins and ends in the Arctic with the explorer Robert Walton seeking a northwest passage. On his journey he first meets Victor Frankenstein and then the monster himself. The arctic atmosphere itself is a fitting symbol for the scientific enterprise on which Frankenstein has embarked and Walton is embarking. The landscape is barren and white: it is human beings who turn the landscape and scientific creation into colorful creation or black horror.

As Dr. Frankenstein lies dying, he recounts his history to Walton. When he speaks of his home in Geneva by a blue lake and snowy mountains, his description is filled with warmth, light, and love. At age seventeen Frankenstein became a student at the University of Ingolstadt, in upper Bavaria, where he later creates his monster.
. . . dreams that had been my food and pleasant rest for so long a space were now become a hell to me...

Frankenstein recoils from his creation, and the monster flees. The rest of the novel follows the theme of pursuit and thus ranges over Europe. Frankenstein has a nervous breakdown and returns to the peacefulness of home. To cure his despair, he wanders on one occasion to the valley of Chamounix. Here, he meets the monster again. Shelley's descriptive powers heighten whenever she presents the monster against a background of sublime and terrifying nature. Frankenstein is mountain climbing across a "troubled sea" of ice (prophetic of the setting at the end of the novel) when the monster bounds toward him over the ice crevices.

As the monster tells of his adventures since his creation, the scene shifts to Germany and the humble cottage of the De Laceys, whom the monster has watched to learn how people act and talk. After promising to make a mate for the monster, Frankenstein plans a trip to England with his friend Clerval. On their way they travel leisurely on the Rhine. From London they travel north to Edinburgh, where they separate. All the time the monster has been following them. Frankenstein goes to a remote Orkney Island to create his female monster. In desolate surroundings the monster again appears and vows revenge when Frankenstein destroys the female creature.

Frankenstein goes sailing to get rid of the female body parts, and his boat is blown off course to Ireland. There he is accused of his friend Clerval's murder and is thrown into prison, where he again has a mental collapse. Released into his father's custody, he returns to Geneva, but this time the powers of home fail to heal. The monster takes his complete revenge, and Frankenstein vows to follow him until he can rid the world of the fiend he has created. The pursued becomes the pursuer.

Analysis: Literary Style

Narration
Instead of beginning with Victor's point of view, Shelley introduces us to Walton first. Using a frame device, in which the tale is told to us by someone who reads it or hears it from someone else, Shelley invites readers to believe Victor's story through an objective person. Shelley also uses an important literary device known as the epistolary form—where letters tell the story—using letters between Walton and his sister to frame both Victor's and the creature's narrative. Before the novel's first chapter, Walton writes to his sister about the "wretched man" he meets, building suspense about the "demon" Victor mentions at the beginning of his narrative. Once Victor begins telling his story, we slowly learn about his childhood and the eventful moments leading up to his studies at the University. Then, the creature interrupts Victor, and we get to hear all the significant moments leading up to his request for a partner. Since the theme of listening is so central to this novel, Shelley makes sure, by incorporating three different narratives, that readers get to hear all sides of the story. Walton's letters introduce and conclude the novel, reinforcing the theme of nurturing.

Setting
The majority of the novel takes place in the Swiss Alps and concludes in the Arctic, although Victor and Clerval travel to other places, such as London, England, the Rhine River which flows from Switzerland north to the Netherlands, and Scotland. All of these locations, except for the Arctic, were among the favorite landscapes for Romantic writers, and Shelley spends great care describing the sublime shapes of the majestic, snow-clad mountains. However, aside from the dark Arctic Ocean, Shelley's setting is unusual; most Gothic novels produce gloomy, haggard settings adorned with decaying mansions and ghostly, supernatural spirits. It is possible the author intended the beautiful Alps to serve as a contrast to the creature's unsightly physical appearance. In addition to the atypical Gothic setting, Shelley also sets her story in contemporary times, another diversion from Gothic novels which usually venture to the Middle Ages and other far away time periods. By using the time period of her day, Shelley makes the creature and the story's events much more realistic and lifelike.
Romanticism
Spanning the years between 1785 and 1830, the Romantic period was marked by the French Revolution and the beginnings of modern industrialism. Most of the early Romantic writers favored the revolution and the changes in lifestyle and sensibility which accompanied it. After shaking off old traditions and customs, writers experienced the newfound freedom of turning inward, rather than outward to the external world, to reflect on issues of the heart and the imagination. In addition, writers like English poet William Wordsworth suddenly challenged his predecessors by writing about natural scenes and rustic, commonplace lifestyles. English poet Samuel Coleridge explored elements of the supernatural in his poetry.

Mary Shelley combined the ethical concerns of her parents with the Romantic sensibilities of Percy Shelley's poetic inclinations. Her father's concern for the underprivileged influenced her description of the poverty-stricken De Lacey family. Her appeals to the imagination, isolation, and nature represented typical scenes and themes explored in some of Percy Shelley's poetry. But Mary's choice of a Gothic novel made her unique in her family and secured her authorial place in the Romantic period.

Gothicism
Horace Walpole introduced the first Gothic novel in 1764 with The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story. Gothic novels were usually mysteries in which sinister and sometimes supernatural events occurred and were ultimately caused by some evil human action. The language was frequently overly dramatic and inflated. Following this movement was the Romantic movement's fascination with the macabre and the superstitious aspects of life, allowing them the freedom to explore the darkest depths of the human mind. Most critics agree that Mary Shelley's Frankenstein reflected her deepest psychological fears and insecurities, such as her inability to prevent her children's deaths, her distressed marriage to a man who showed no remorse for his daughters' deaths, and her feelings of inadequacy as a writer. The Gothic novel usually expresses, often in subtle and indirect ways, our repressed anxieties. The settings usually take place far away from reality or realistic portrayals of everyday life. Shelley's setting, of course, is the exception to most Gothic novels. The fact that the creature wanders the breathtaking Alps instead of a dark, craggy mansion in the middle of nowhere either compounds the reader's fear or makes the creature more human.

Doppelganger
Many literary critics have noted the Doppelganger effect—the idea that a living person has a ghostly double haunting him—between Victor and his creature. Presenting Victor and the creature as doubles allows Shelley to dramatize two aspects of a character, usually the "good" and "bad" selves. Victor's desire to ignore his creature parallels his desire to disregard the darkest part of his self. The famous psychologist Sigmund Freud characterizes this "dark" side as the Id, while Carl Jung, another famous psychologist, refers to our "dark" side as the Jungian shadow. Jung claims that we all have characteristics we don't like about ourselves, yet these unsavory attributes stay with us like a shadow tailgating its leader. The creature represents Victor's "evil" shadow, just as Victor represents the creature's. When presented this way, it makes sense that so many readers confuse the creature and Victor by assuming that the creature is named Frankenstein. Both of these characters "alternately pursue and flee from one another . . . [L]ike fragments of a mind in conflict with itself," as Eleanor Ty observes in the Concise Dictionary of British Literary Biography. But taken together as one person, Victor and his creature combine to represent the full spectrum of what it means to be human—to be joyful, compassionate, empathetic, and hateful, and also love humanity, desire knowledge, honor justice, fear the unknown, dread abandonment, and fear mortality. No other character in the novel assumes this range of human complexity.

Analysis: Literary Qualities
Shelley uses an important literary technique—the story-within-a-story-within-a-story. Walton tells the whole story of Frankenstein and his monster as related to him by Frankenstein, with the addition of his own meeting
with the monster after Frankenstein's death within the context of his arctic exploration. Within Frankenstein's account is the monster's own tale of what he did after fleeing from Frankenstein: how he watched the De Laceys and came to understand human speech, emotion, and history. Each of the stories presents comparisons and contrasts to the others. For example, Walton's exploration of the Arctic is a scientific discovery similar to Frankenstein's creation of the monster, but Walton's expedition fails when his men force him to turn back, whereas Frankenstein does succeed in creating the monster, although the results are questionable.

In addition to having the stories play off one another, Shelley uses the characters to play off one another. Walton, for instance, feels much sympathy for Frankenstein but resembles the monster. He, too, longs for companionship—he has "no friend . . . no one to participate [in] my joy . . . to sustain me in dejection." When Frankenstein dies, Walton loses both his dreams of friendship and his dream of discovery.

Another literary technique which Shelley uses to give greater depth to her story is literary allusion. Frankenstein is subtitled "The Modern Prometheus," an allusion to the Greek god Prometheus who championed humankind and brought fire to it. Prometheus's kindness toward humanity, however, has a backlash: humans are alienated from heaven. Frankenstein is a modern Prometheus in that, striving against human limitations to bring light to people, he creates a human-like creature but alienates himself from his creation once he sees it can never fit into humanity.

Another important literary allusion in Frankenstein is to Paradise Lost. The book is introduced by three lines from Paradise Lost, and Paradise Lost is one of the three books which the monster reads and on which he founds his beliefs about the cosmos. He sees himself as both Adam and Satan—alone like Adam before Eve, yet bitter like Satan viewing the bliss of God. From these and other uses of literary allusion, Shelley makes her story much more than a horror story of a mad doctor and his monster; it is a creation story of profound frustration, alienation and responsibility with resonances of ancient Greek and Christian thought.

**Analysis: Social Concerns**

Frankenstein is a product of its time — the early nineteenth century — a world of social, political, scientific, and economic upheaval. On the one hand, the novel emphasizes the importance of the intellect in seeking out the secrets of the universe (rationalism). Yet it also validates the emotions and the importance of individual needs (romanticism).

Aside from its historical interest, why does Frankenstein continue to be so popular, and what does it say to us today? For one thing, at the heart of the novel is a question about science and its relationship to humanity. Does science always act for the good of man, or does it have a dark side? Does man have the right or the power and intellect to act as a creator or God? Mary Shelley's answer seems to be that science and progress are ethically neutral with the capacity to work for either good or evil. Science thus presents humans with the enormous challenge to handle its power responsibly and humanely.

**Analysis: Social Sensitivity**

In a tale of a murderous and revengeful monster, there are, of course, scenes of violence and terror; three murders, an execution and a cottage burned by arson, as well as three more deaths. Like classical Greek dramatists, Shelley to some extent mitigates the horror of these scenes by having the violence take place "offstage." That is, she never directly presents the monster strangling his victims. In each case she describes how the body is found and the sorrow the family members, friends, and community feel at the death. She emphasizes the grief rather than the grisly details of the murder or the horrible condition of the body. In no sense does she linger over gory details. The monster's victims are all innocent. If the monster had killed only his creator for cruelly abandoning him, the reader's judgment of the monster might be less harsh. The impact
of the violence is further diminished because Frankenstein is reporting to Walton each murder long after the deed was done.

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

- **Early 1800s**: After the French Revolution ended, England turned its attention to domestic and economic concerns—particularly to problems resulting from a rapidly growing industrial nation.

  **Today**: Domestic and economic concerns about employment and education also stem from rapid change, as the business world moves from emphasizing industrial production to a service and information economy.

- **Early 1800s**: Scientific advancements, especially Erasmus Darwin's studies in biological evolution, caused individuals to question God's authority and inquire into matters regarding the generation of human life.

  **Today**: Animal scientists in Scotland successfully tweak the DNA from an adult sheep to clone another individual sheep. The U.S. government bans federal funding of experiments with cloning using human DNA.

- **Early 1800s**: Romantic writers experience a literary Renaissance as critical theory affirms the achievements of the great poets of the age. Writers enjoy literary freedom, experimenting with a bold new language and new genres like Gothicism.

  **Today**: Appreciation of the arts seems to be on the decrease, as most individuals spend their time with television rather than with various art mediums. Funding has been greatly reduced for the National Endowment of the Arts, and even high school music and art classes have had to be cut at many public schools.

- **Early 1800s**: Nautical explorations establish trading routes and open up communication to other cultures. Robert Walton's quest to find the North Pole mirrors the adventures of nineteenth-century scientists and explorers alike.

  **Today**: The continuing exploration of space that seemed so likely after the lunar landing in 1969 has slowed down, as governments can no longer afford to fund large space programs. Projects involving a space station around Earth and a manned mission to Mars are more likely to come from cooperative efforts involving several nations.

Analysis: Topics for Discussion

1. Why is the novel subtitled *The Modern Prometheus*?
2. Why does Frankenstein create such a large, ugly monster rather than a normal-sized, good-looking man?
3. Why does Frankenstein not make a mate for the monster?
4. Why, initially, does Frankenstein hate his creature?
5. What is the purpose of the De Lacey interlude? How does it relate to the novel as a whole?
6. What conclusion does the monster reach about mankind after hearing Volney's "Ruins of Empires" and reading Goethe, Plutarch, and Milton?
7. Why do we now refer to the monster as Frankenstein while in the novel he is unnamed?

8. Why does the monster kill Elizabeth?

9. In what ways is Frankenstein the "brother" of Walton's "heart"?

10. According to George Levine, "one of the novel's themes is the danger of knowledge." How is knowledge dangerous in Frankenstein?

11. Why does the monster keep leaving clues for Frankenstein to follow him?

Bibliography


Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading

Sources


**Further Reading**


Mellor, Anne K. *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*. Methuen, Inc., 1988. As one of the most well-known Shelley critics, Mellor draws from unpublished archival material, studying the relationships between Mary and the central personalities in her life. Her biography contains a powerful warning to parents who do not care for their children and to scientists who refuse to take responsibility for their discoveries.


**Analysis: Ideas for Reports and Papers**

1. How does the popular conception of Frankenstein differ from the monster Shelley describes in *Frankenstein*? Why has this change come about? Why is Shelley's version still worth reading?

2. Describe the structure of the novel. How does the structure add to the novel's effectiveness?

3. The monster describes himself as being like both Adam and Satan. Compare and contrast these figures. Do we finally think of the monster as a degraded, noble creature or as a diabolical fiend?

4. In Chapter 5, Frankenstein quotes some lines from Coleridge's poem "The Rime of Ancient Mariner." Compare Frankenstein to the mariner.

5. Explain how the characters work as foils to and images of each other (Frankenstein-the-monster, Walton-Clerval-Elizabeth).

6. What is nature like in *Frankenstein*? Is it a force for good or evil?

7. Frankenstein's dying words to Walton are, "Seek happiness in tranquility and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in my hopes, yet another may succeed." Why does Shelley close her novel with these lines? How does she feel about scientific discovery?

**Analysis: Topics for Further Study**

- Compare and contrast Robert Walton's and Victor Frankenstein's personalities. You might draw parallels between their quest to conquer the unknown, their emotional ties to other individuals, or their loneliness.
- Research some of the prominent issues in your society that Shelley addresses in her novel, such as genetic engineering, or the effects of abandonment on children whose fathers have disappeared from their lives. Make a comparison between the novel and your discoveries and discuss observations.
about how your society is coping with or addressing these sensitive issues.

• Analyze the theme of justice in the novel. What does Justine's trial have to do with Victor's treatment of his creature or the creature's treatment of Victor's family and friends? How does the theme of revenge relate to issues of justice?

• Research some of the characteristics of the Romantic movement, such as isolation, an emphasis on nature, or the notion that humans are inherently good, and argue how and why Shelley's novel is an embodiment of the English Romantic movement. Or, argue why her novel is not an embodiment of the English Romantic movement.

**Analysis: Media Adaptations**

There have been so many plays, movies, and recordings of *Frankenstein* that it would be difficult to list all of the productions. Therefore, the list below represents the most popular, most controversial, and most influential recordings and dramatizations:


• Films: *Frankenstein* starred Colin Clive and Boris Karloff; it was released by Universal in 1931. *The Bride of Frankenstein*, the sequel to the 1931 film, starred Boris Karloff and Elsa Lanchester; it was released in 1935 by Universal. *Son of Frankenstein*, also a sequel to the above mentioned productions, starred Basil Rathbone, Karloff, and Bela Lugosi and was released in 1939 by Universal. All three are available from MCA/Universal Home Video.

• *The Curse of Frankenstein*, a 1957 horror film produced by Warner Brothers, included Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee as cast members; the first in a series of films inspired by Shelley's novel, it is available from Warner Home Video. *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* was released in 1969 by Warner Brothers, Peter Cushing and Veronica Carlson star as the central characters. *Young Frankenstein* was released in 1974 by Fox; available from CBS-Fox Video, this comedy-horror film received Academy Award nominations for Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Sound; cast includes Gene Wilder, Peter Boyle, and director-star Mel Brooks.

• More recent films include 1985's *The Bride*, starring Sting and Jennifer Beals, available from CBS/Fox Video; famed horror director Roger Corman's 1990 work *Frankenstein Unbound*, which includes Mary Shelley as a character and stars John Hurt, Raul Julia, and Bridget Fonda, available from CBS/Fox Video; the 1993 cable production *Frankenstein*, starring Patrick Bergin and Randy Quaid, available from Turner Home Entertainment; and *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, released in 1994 by American Zoetrope and available from Columbia Tristar Home Video, featuring Robert De Niro and director-star Kenneth Branagh.


**Analysis: What Do I Read Next?**

• *Dracula* by Bram Stoker was published in 1897 and horrified audiences with its tale of a bloodsucking vampire who appears at nightfall to pursue vulnerable women.

• Written by Mary Shelley in 1826, *The Last Man* is a work of science fiction that chronicles the extermination of the human race by plague.
• A work by Mary Shelley's father, William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) is the story of a man bound to and haunted by another man through his knowledge of a secret crime.

• *Prometheus Unbound*, by Percy Shelley, is a dramatized philosophical essay about the origin of evil and the moral responsibility of individuals to restore order in their world. It was published in 1820.

• Lois McMaster Bujold's Hugo-winning science-fiction novel *Mirror Dance* (1994) explores issues surrounding clones and an individual's responsibility to his clone.

• In *Genetic Engineering: Dreams and Nightmares* (1996), authors V. E. A. Russo, David Cove, and Enzo Russo present a discussion of the ethical issues surrounding modern scientific advances in genetics. The book is targeted toward the average lay reader.

### Analysis: For Further Reference


**Harris, Jane. The Woman Who Created Frankenstein: A Portrait of Mary Shelley.** New York: Harper and Row, 1979. This biography of Mary Shelley, especially written for young readers, also contains a plot summary of Frankenstein and film information.

**Mellor, Anne K. Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters.** London: Methuen, 1988. Mellor, a noted feminist critic, argues that Shelley identified with the motherless creature and that the character of Dr. Frankenstein was a parody of her husband.

**Spark, Muriel. Mary Shelley.** New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987. This is a reworking of Spark's 1951 biography of Shelley, *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Shelley*. It is divided into two parts, biographical and critical information.


**Sunstein, Emily. Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality.** Boston: Little, Brown, 1989. Seen against the backdrop of her parents and husband, whose careers and reputations so overshadowed her own, Mary Shelley emerges in this biography as a truly remarkable human being.

**Walling, William A. Mary Shelley.** New York: Twayne, 1972. This biography has an especially important section on the duality in Victor Frankenstein's character.

### Analysis: Literary Precedents

Another literary technique which Shelley uses to give greater depth to her story is literary allusion. *Frankenstein* is subtitled "The Modern Prometheus," an allusion to the Greek god Prometheus who championed humankind and brought fire to it. Prometheus' kindness toward humanity, however, has a backlash: Humans are alienated from heaven. Frankenstein is a modern Prometheus in that, striving against human limitations to bring light to people, he creates a humanlike creature but alienates himself from his creation once he sees it can never fit into humanity.

Another important literary allusion in *Frankenstein* is to John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). The book is introduced by three lines from *Paradise Lost*, and *Paradise Lost* is one of the three books which the monster reads and on which he founds his beliefs about the cosmos. He sees himself as both Adam and Satan — alone
like Adam before Eve, yet bitter like Satan viewing the bliss of God. From these and other uses of literary allusion, Shelley makes her story much more than a horror story of a mad doctor and his monster: It is a creation story of profound frustration, alienation, and responsibility, with resonances of ancient Greek and Christian thought.

**Analysis: Adaptations**

Adaptations of *Frankenstein* may well number in the hundreds. The most significant motion picture adaptation is director James Whale's *Frankenstein* of 1931. A short motion picture (seventy-one minutes), it was probably meant to be a second feature. But Boris Karloff gives a remarkable performance as the monster, conveying a combination of menace and innocence which to this day captures the imaginations of viewers. His monster is much different from the one in Shelley's novel; without dialogue, Karloff must use gesture and facial expression to convey meaning and emotion. The basic events of the novel have been radically condensed and simplified, so that the motion picture is not an authentic rendering of the novel. The monster rampages through the countryside, eventually pursued by the now classic and clichéd horde of torch-carrying villagers. Karloff is well supported by Colin Clive, Mae Clarke, and John Boles.

James Whale also directed *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), which again stars Karloff as the monster. This too is a short motion picture, only seventy-five minutes, but it is highly regarded by critics as the quintessential horror film. Colin Clive, as Henry Frankenstein, is compelled by Dr. Praetorius (Ernest Thesiger) to create a female monster. *Bride of Frankenstein* includes some of the most memorable scenes in cinema, such as the female monster's reaction to seeing her intended mate for the first time. Actors Valerie Hobson, Dwight Frye, and Ernest Thesiger ably support the main characters, and Else Lanchester gives a memorably eccentric performance.

Karloff returns as the monster in *Son of Frankenstein*, directed by Rowland V. Lee (1939). A feature-length (ninety-nine minutes) motion picture, it is an exceptionally well-made sequel to the 1931 *Frankenstein*. Basil Rathbone plays Wolf Frankenstein, son of the original monster-maker. With the help of Ygor, played by Bela Lugosi, Wolf Frankenstein revives his father's creation, with suitable scariness enhanced by fine lighting and camera work. Lugosi's Ygor is the model for countless spin-offs of the mad scientist tale; what mad scientist's laboratory is complete without a crazed assistant? Karloff, Rathbone, and Lugosi, are well supported by Josephine Hutchinson and Lionel Atwill.

Boris Karloff plays a mad scientist in the *House of Frankenstein* (1944), a brief second-feature directed by Erle C. Kenton. He and his crazed assistant, played by J. Carroll Naish, wreak insane revenge on the mad scientist's enemies. Glenn Strange plays the monster, John Carradine plays Dracula, and Lon Chaney plays the Wolfman in a better-than-average monster get-together.

The most unfortunate of the Frankenstein films featuring Karloff in one role or another is *Frankenstein 1970* (released in 1958). It stars Karloff as the great-grandson of the original monster-maker and is directed by Howard W. Koch. It co-stars Tom Duggan, Jana Lund, and Don Barry. This is an appallingly stupid motion picture and is mentioned here only because Karloff is in it.

In *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943), Bela Lugosi is the monster; he is supported by Lon Chaney, Jr., Ilona Massey, Maria Ouspenskaya, and Patric Knowles. The picture was directed by Roy William Neill. Although one of a multitude of “This Monster Meets That Monster” motion pictures, *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* is actually good, with Lugosi giving an over-the-top performance.

A good remaking of the Frankenstein story is director Terence Fisher's *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), from the famous Hammer Films horror-picture studio, with Peter Cushing as the scientist and Christopher Lee
as the monster. Both give good, sensitive performances in a well-made motion picture. A good updating of the tale is *Horror of Frankenstein*, directed by Jimmy Sangster and starring Ralph Bates, Kate O'Mara, Veronica Carlson, and Dennis Price. In it, a medical student makes a monster; it is somewhat gory.

Better known, but not a good, is another 1957 motion picture, *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein*, directed by Herbert L. Strock. As the mad scientist, actor Whit Bissell pieces together a monster out of pieces of local American teenagers. The picture also stars Robert Burton, Phyllis Coates, and Gary Conway. A sequel to the also-not-particularly-good *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, this film is only for those viewers with very high tolerance for rampant silliness.

In 1973, a new *Frankenstein* was presented as a television movie, directed by Glenn Jordan and starring Bo Svenson as the monster. A long (over two hours) version of Shelley's novel, it is somewhat more accurate than most. Even so, it is a tepid retelling. Another made-for-television version is 1984's *Frankenstein*. Directed by James Ormerod, it stars David Warner as the monster and Robert Powell as Dr. Frankenstein; the supporting cast includes John Gielgud, Carrie Fisher, Susan Wooldridge, and Terence Alexander. This is good for a television production, and is even better than most horror pictures. The monster's rampaging is quite satisfying.

A more recent recasting of Shelly's novel is *Frankenstein Unbound* (1990), directed by Roger Corman, one of the most celebrated makers of horror films. John Hurt, Raul Julia, Bridget Fonda, and Jason Patric star in a tale of time-traveling scientist from the year 2031 who ends up in the company not only of Mary Shelley, but of Dr. Frankenstein. This motion picture is gory, violent, and not one of Corman's best efforts. The film relies too much on gore and not enough on characterization.

Two good comedies have been made out of the Frankenstein corpus, both drawing both on Shelley's novel and the cinematic traditions that have evolved out of Shelley's original work, *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* and *Young Frankenstein*. Released in 1948, and ably directed by Charles Barton, *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* stars the comedy team of Bud Abbott and Lou Costello as two innocents caught up in a world of mystery, suspense, and frights. The motion picture was immensely successful and spawned a number of "Abbott and Costello Meet . . ." sequels. In it, Bela Lugosi reprises his most famous role, that of Count Dracula. The Count, for some weird reason or another, has come to America to reawaken the dormant Frankenstein's monster (Glenn Strange) and loose him upon an unsuspecting world. The wolfman (Lon Chaney, Jr.) turns out to be one of the good guys when not the wolf, although he is very nasty when the wolf. Abbott and Costello stage numerous pratfalls and other physical comedy and somehow manage to save the girl and themselves while Dracula tries to take Costello's brain and monsters run suitably amok. This is an hilarious comedy that has become a Halloween tradition in much of America.

In terms movie-making art, *Young Frankenstein* may exceed even the motion pictures it lampoons. One of director Mel Brooks's best efforts, the motion picture captures the essence of the Frankenstein mythos. Gene Wilder plays Victor Frankenstein's descendant (who pronounces his last name as Fronk-n-steen to differentiate it from the name of his embarrassing ancestor). Marty Feldman is the hunchbacked assistant (with a mobile hunch), and Peter Boyle plays a sensitive monster who is merely misunderstood. The cinematography, the music, and the acting, and the well-timed comedy make *Young Frankenstein* a classic.

**Quotes: Essential Quotes by Character: Victor Frankenstein**

**Essential Passage 1:** [Chapter 1]
From Italy they visited Germany and France. I, their eldest child, was born in Naples, and as an infant accompanied them in their rambles. I remained for several years their only child. Much as they were attached to each other, they seemed to draw inexhaustible stores of affection from a very mine of love to bestow them upon me. My mother’s tender caresses, and my father’s smile of benevolent pleasure while regarding me, are my first recollections. I was their plaything and their idol, and something better—their child, the innocent and helpless creature bestowed in them by Heaven, whom to bring up to good, and whose future lot fulfilled their duties towards me. With this deep consciousness of what they owed towards the being to which they had given life, added to the active spirit of tenderness that animated both, it may be imagined that while during every hour of my infant life I received a lesson of patience, of charity, and of self-control, I was so guided by a silken cord that all seemed but one train of enjoyment to me.

Summary

On board Robert Walton’s ship bound for the Arctic, an ill and tortured Victor Frankenstein tells Walton his life story. His father, Alphonse, was a gentleman, whose kindness of heart led him to marry the daughter of his best friend after her father’s death. Saved from poverty, she in her turn develops a compassion and charity to those in similar, desperate situations. Having the financial resources to travel, the couple journeys around Europe, settling for a time in Italy. When their firstborn son, Victor, arrives, they shower him with love. He is the center of their lives, and they hold of highest importance the duty they have in raising a loving and honorable son. Therefore Victor grows up with lessons of patience, charity, and self-control imprinted on his heart. The Frankensteins’ understanding of their roles as parents will be a sharp contrast to the role Victor assumes as a creator toward his creature.

Essential Passage 2: Chapter 2

Thus strangely are our souls constructed, and by such slight ligaments are we bound to prosperity or ruin. When I look back, it seems to me as if this almost miraculous change of inclination and will was the immediate suggest of the guardian angel of my life—the last effort made by the spirit of preservation to avert the storm that was even then hanging in the stars, and ready to envelope me. Her victory was announced by an unusual tranquility and gladness of soul, which followed the relinquishing of my ancient and latterly tormenting studies. It was thus that I was to be taught to associate evil with their prosecution, happiness with their disregard.

It was a strong effort of the spirit of good; but it was ineffectual. Destiny was too potent, and her immutable laws had decreed my utter and terrible destruction.

Summary

As a youth, Victor Frankenstein became interested in the study of alchemy and read all he could get his hands on about this proto-science that endeavored to change base metals to gold. Though his father warns him that such writings are “trash,” Victor continues his studies. One day, he observes lightning strike a tree. From that event his attentions turn to more “acceptable” studies, the causes of natural incidents, like lightning. On reflection, Victor believes that this is an opportunity presented him by Providence to turn away from the path that Destiny has chosen for him. If he had remained interested in pure natural science, his life would have been different, and the lives of those he loved would have been saved from death. To Victor, this is the last chance that he has to refuse the call of Fate, which seems to want him to destroy himself and others.

Essential Passage 3: Chapter 9
...Sleep fled from my eyes; I wandered like an evil spirit, for I had committed deeds of mischief beyond description horrible, and more, much more (I persuaded myself), was yet behind. Yet my heart overflowed with kindness, and the love of virtue. I had begun life with benevolent intentions, and thirsted for the moment when I should put them in practice, and make myself useful to my fellow-beings. Now all was blasted: instead of that serenity of conscience, which allowed me to look back upon the past with self-satisfaction, and from thence to gather promise of new hopes, I was seized by remorse and the sense of guilt, which hurried me away to a hell of intense tortures, such as no language can describe.

Summary

Victor flees from his apartments, realizing the implications of what he has done in bringing his creature to life. He wanders the streets of Ingolstadt until Henry Clerval, his childhood friend from home, arrives and discovers him. Falling into a fever, Victor is ill for several months. During his studies and his subsequent illness, Victor does not return to his family in Geneva for six years. He has fallen into lack of communication while working on the creature. Now, Victor prepares to return home at some point when he receives word that his youngest brother, William, has been murdered. Returning home, he spots his creature in the countryside and becomes convinced that this monster he created is the killer. Victor is in a quandary when Justine, the beloved friend and servant of Elizabeth, is convicted and executed for the murder. Knowing that now he has the blood of two people on his hands, Victor departs from Geneva in order to find some peace.

Analysis of Essential Passages

Victor Frankenstein in many ways is a mirror image of his creature. Much like the protagonist in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Victor and the monster are the separate facets of the composite nature of the individual. The prospects of both good and evil are present in each person, much like both Victor and his creation enter into the world as good, and eventually choose the side of evil to pursue their own individual destinies.

Victor was born into a loving family, the parents of which held to the *tabula rasa* principle of education that was a staple of Enlightenment philosophy. A person is born good. It is society that turns him to evil. Thus, with their child-rearing methods, Alphonse and Caroline Frankenstein raised a child to be good, loving, and compassionate. By all interpretations of Enlightenment thinking, therefore, Victor should have been a noble character.

Yet Victor comes to a crossroads in his youth. He could continue with the education of his parents, or he could choose to follow his own hubris, placing himself in the role of God creating a man. Victor himself, not his upbringing or society, is responsible for his fall.

The turning point in Victor’s life is his interest in alchemy, especially in the prolongation or creation of life. Though long disproved as viable, this ancient science appealed to Victor, especially following the untimely death of his mother. In creating the monster Victor desires to create life. Afterwards, when the full realization of the consequences of his actions becomes apparent, Victor still desires to control life by destroying it.

Victor sees in hindsight that Fate has given him the opportunity to turn away from his so-called “Destiny of Destruction.” His interest in natural science is a way out of his obsession, yet he shuns it. When the creature comes to life, Victor Frankenstein has passed the point of no return.

By refusing to identify himself as the creator of the monster who causes the deaths of William and Justine, Victor identified himself instead as the equal of the monster. As the creature wanders “as an evil spirit,” so too does Victor. His description of himself as he wanders through the Alps could easily have been a
description of the creature. Both have committed evil against the laws of nature. Both have put themselves in
the place of God, by choosing who lives and who dies. Both are created in a condition of goodness, love, and
virtue. Both follow their own wills at the expense of others.

It is perhaps for this reason that Victor lets slip through his fingers the numerous opportunities to destroy the
creature. He submits to the creature’s plea that he create a mate for him. He cannot destroy him, but he is able
to do his bidding in order that the monster will depart from Europe and thus out of his life. But to end the life
he created seems to be beyond his power. It would be the same as committing suicide. In the end, it is the
creature who most deeply realizes this; he truly grieves for the death of his creator. His justification for
revenge is gone. Victor could not accept, though subconsciously he knew that it was he, and not his creature,
who was the true monster.

Quotes: Essential Quotes by Theme: Loneliness

Essential Passage 1: Letter 2

But I have one want which I have never yet been able to satisfy; and the absence of the object
of which I now feel as a most severe evil. I have no friend, Margaret: when I am glowing with
the enthusiasm of success, there will be none to participate in my joy; if I am assailed by
disappointment, no one will endeavor to sustain me in dejection. I shall commit my thoughts
to paper, it is true; but that is a poor medium for the communication of feeling. I desire the
company of a man who could sympathise with me; whose eyes would reply to mine. You
may deem me romantic, my dear sister, but I bitterly feel the want of a friend. I have no one
near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind,
whose tastes are like my own, to approve or amend my plans. How would such a friend repair
the faults of your poor brother!

Summary

Robert Walton has long had the dream of sailing to uncharted regions at the North Pole. In the age of
exploration in the eighteenth century, daring individuals continue to try to find a route, a Northwest Passage,
around the northern shores of the North American continent. With an inheritance, Walton has supplied
himself with a ship and crew, spending years in the preparations. Now, he is ready to begin his voyage,
leaving from the northern port of Archangel in Russia. Yet fulfilling his dream has become less important as
he realizes his loneliness and his friendless condition. He confesses to his sister, Margaret, that he is lonely on
the voyage, as much as he was throughout his life. He yearns for a kindred spirit, a bosom companion to share
his thoughts and dreams. Not only companionship, but accountability is what Walton desires. His hopes are
for someone who will guide him away from his faults and toward a life of honor and nobility.

Essential Passage 2: Chapter 2

...We possessed a house in Geneva, and a campagne on Belrive, the eastern shore of the lake,
at the distance of rather more than a league from the city. We reside principally in the latter,
and the lives of my parents were passed in considerable seclusion. It was my temper to avoid
a crowd, and to attach myself fervently to a few. I was indifferent, therefore, to my
schoolfellows in general; but I united myself in the bonds of the closest friendship to one
among them. Henry Clerval was the son of a merchant of Geneva.

Summary
Victor grows up in a close and loving family. Being the eldest son, he enjoys his parents undivided attention until he is seven years of age, when his brother Ernest is born. Living in the Swiss city of Geneva, the family also has a country home where they spent most of the time. The family, along with Victor, lives in relative seclusion from their neighbors. The home in Belrive is open only to those who reside there, and the chosen few who are invited to become a part of the Frankenstein circle. There Victor gains a single friend, Henry Clerval. He avoids most of the boys his own age, choosing a solitary existence, except for Henry. Though many friendships are available to him, he rejects them all in favor of just one. Henry Clerval will then be his chief, and indeed only, friend outside his immediate family, and will play a part in the story. Henry eventually joins Victor in Ingolstadt after Victor creates the monster.

Essential Passage 3: Chapter 10

How can I move thee? Will no entreaties cause thee to turn a favourable eye upon thy creature, who implores thy goodness and compassion? Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity: but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow-creatures, who owe me nothing? They spurn and hate me. The desert mountains and dreary glaciers are my refuge. I have wandered here many days’ the caves of ice, which I only do not fear, are a dwelling to me, and the only one which man does not grudge. These bleak skies I hail, for they are kinder to me than your fellow-beings. If the multitude of mankind knew of my existence, they would do as you do, and arm themselves for my destruction.

Summary

The creature has met Victor in a cave in the sea of ice in the mountains. He has told Victor of his travels, from the time when Victor abandoned him at his apartments in Ingolstadt, through his wanderings through the villages and forest to Germany, where he encounters the DeLacey family. From the latter, the creature learns to speak and read, enabling him to join the human community. But his endeavors have been in vain, for he is shunned and tormented because of his appearance. As Victor has rejected him, so have all people. In this the creature feels the intense loneliness of the outcast. Although born with a heart full of goodness and love, the creature meets nothing but hate. He has found himself in the caves of ice, immune to the cold. The ice is warmer than the humans he has encountered. He knows that, if the people below knew of his living in the caves, they would travel as Victor has done, to put him to death if they can.

Analysis of Essential Passages

Though *Frankenstein* is often promoted as a horror story, the horror lies not in the terror of the unknown, but in the unloved. Loneliness is at the heart of the fear that pervades the hearts of the three major characters.

Robert Walton sets the foundation of the absence of companionship as he writes to his sister of his loneliness. Earthly accomplishment cannot fill the void in his life that a true friend would. Although surrounded by crew members, he cannot find a true kindred spirit, someone to share his dreams, his aspirations, his faults, and his failures. The emptiness of the Arctic mirrors the emptiness of his life. He seeks a passage through the ice, as he hopes to find a soul with him he can share true friendship.

In the Romantic era, friendship between men often took the tone that in today’s culture would sound more like a physical relationship, yet it would be a misinterpretation. True friendship, both between men and between women, was often held much higher than it is in the modern world. Someone with whom one can share the feelings that only someone of one’s own gender could was considered to be even higher than that between a man and a woman. Thus, though the modern reader may feel uncomfortable with the some of the expressions used, such as in Walton’s letter, to read more into it would be a gross misinterpretation.
It is against this presentation of friendship with which Victor does not fully fall in line. Although he has a close relationship with Henry Clerval, it is not the same as that described by Walton as the desire of his heart. Victor’s weakness lies in his isolation from others. This separate is thus at the heart of his inability to connect with his creature. It is a flaw of the heart, rather than horror, that causes Victor to reject the creature. It is his lack of loneliness that leads to the terror.

It is the creature himself that presents the horror of complete loneliness. He is separated and rejected from all humanity, as well as his creator. He is the picture of a person without family, with friend, with God. The loneliness is not due to any action he himself has taken, but to the evil of others in their rejection of him based on appearance. A loving heart, the creature has done nothing deserve the isolation. Thus forced apart, he now pledges himself to make himself deserving of this separation. By one murderous act after another, the creature brings the darkness of total loneliness closer and closer to Victor.

The message of Frankenstein, a product of the Age of Romanticism, is thus not a fear of the unknown. It is a fear of the results of rejection, of refusing love to those who have a right to expect that love from us. The horror is not in the creature. It is loneliness that each of us fears.

Teaching Guide: Introduction

So, you’re going to teach Frankenstein. This classic novel has been a mainstay of English classrooms for generations and remains Mary Shelley’s most iconic work. Whether it’s your first or hundredth time guiding students through Shelley’s novel, this teaching guide will ensure a rewarding experience for everyone—including you. It will expose students to the rhetorical power of literary devices such as allusion, symbolism, point-of-view, and narration. Students can also engage with important themes, such as gender roles and the dangers of ambition. This guide highlights the text’s most salient aspects to keep in mind before you begin teaching.

Facts at a Glance

- Publication Date: 1818
- Author: Mary Shelley
- Country of Origin: England
- Genre: Gothic Novel
- Literary Period: Romantic
- Conflict: Person vs. Supernatural, Person vs. Self
- Narration: First-Person
- Setting: Geneva, Switzerland, and the Arctic, late 1700s
- Structure: Prose, Epistolary
- Tone: Dramatic, Anxious, Apprehensive

History of the Text

Frankenstein’s Reception History: Frankenstein was Mary Shelley’s most popular work of fiction. However, upon its publication in 1818, critical reception was mixed. Though Shelley’s writing style was generally praised, some reviewers criticized the novel as blasphemous and absurd. Below are four major criticisms:

- Dedication to William Godwin: The novel is dedicated to William Godwin, Mary Shelley’s father. Godwin was one of the first modern proponents of anarchism and a harsh critic of aristocratic privilege and Britain’s political system. Furthermore, Godwin lived with controversial feminist writer
Mary Wollstonecraft out of wedlock and only married her after she became pregnant. Conservative reviewers of *Frankenstein* were appalled by the novel’s association with such a radical literary figure.

**Improbability:** Some reviewers, such as John Wilson Croker of The Quarterly Review, took issue with the novel’s supernatural premise, calling it a “tissue of horrible and disgusting absurdity.” Others, such as Sir Walter Scott in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, questioned the probability of details such as the monster’s acquisition of language and subsequent reading of Milton, Goethe, and Plutarch.

**Female authorship:** As it was dubiously acceptable for women to write novels, *Frankenstein* was initially published anonymously—and some reviewers speculated that it was written by Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley’s husband. Mary Shelley’s authorship was soon exposed, however, and many of the novel’s perceived flaws were attributed to its having been written by a woman.

**Morality:** Some critics took issue with Shelley’s refusal to moralize Victor Frankenstein’s creation of the monster—considered by many audiences a blasphemous act of playing God. Furthermore, the novel was criticized as having no educational value for impressionable readers. John Wilson Croker, for example, lamented that *Frankenstein* “inculcates no lesson of conduct, manners, or morality.”

*Frankenstein’s Publication History:* The first edition of *Frankenstein* was initially published anonymously in three volumes on January 1, 1818. Several years later, either Mary Shelley or her father, William Godwin, made 114 changes—mostly to spelling and phrasing—to the original text. The altered version was released as a second edition in August of 1823. A third edition, containing substantial thematic changes, appeared in 1831, by which time Shelley had lost her husband, two children, and Lord Byron, a close friend of the family. Furthermore, Shelley was struggling financially. Misfortune came to convince her that human events are determined by material forces outside human control. The 1831 edition contained the following changes:

- **Structure:** Following Letters 1 through 4, the novel’s chapters proceed from 1 to 24 instead of being divided into three volumes. This change highlights the nesting of Walton’s, Frankenstein’s, and the monster’s stories within one other.
- **Elizabeth Lavenza’s origins:** In the 1818 edition, Elizabeth is Victor’s cousin. Though it was not entirely unheard of for cousins to marry during Shelley’s time, contemporary readers may have found Elizabeth’s and Victor’s marriage scandalous. In the 1831 edition, Elizabeth is merely an orphan of no relation to the Frankensteins.
- **Free will:** Victor Frankenstein appears to be at the mercy of fate in the 1831 edition, whereas he exercised free will and changed his circumstances in the 1818 edition. Frankenstein’s helplessness underscores Shelley’s radically altered philosophical view that human events are controlled by external material forces.

**Teaching Guide:** **Teaching Approaches**

**Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein as Character Foils:** Compare and contrast the character traits of Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein. While both men are ambitious, Victor Frankenstein becomes obsessed with his goals. Ultimately, his ambition leads to disaster for himself and his loved ones. Conversely, Robert Walton decides to give up his quest to the North Pole in order to preserve both his life and the lives of his crew.

- For discussion: Follow Walton’s and Frankenstein’s predominant character traits as they develop throughout the novel, especially in relation to the context of the plot. How does each character respond to danger and discouragement? How does each change?
- For discussion: At the end of the novel, what do Walton’s and Frankenstein’s actions suggest about ambition and exploration? Do you think there is an intended moral? Explain your thinking.
Scientific Exploration as a Theme: The majority of the novel’s conflicts are driven by Victor Frankenstein’s obsessive search for the origins of life. His curiosity and self-directed scientific studies spiral out of control, leading to isolation, deteriorating health, and destruction.

- **For discussion:** What evidence can you find of the novel’s repeated warnings that scientific knowledge can be dangerous and destructive? What does this evidence suggest about educational discipline versus limitless exploration and experimentation?
- **For discussion:** Why would a work of Romantic literature offer criticisms of science? In what ways are the values of the Romanticism and the scientific Enlightenment at odds?

The Creature and Victor Frankenstein as Character Foils: Throughout the novel, Victor Frankenstein is frequently depicted as dark, mysterious, and passionate—classic traits of a Byronic hero. Though Henry Clerval is most often considered to be his foil, the creature contrasts with Frankenstein’s character in ways that emphasize his arrogance and selfishness. While the creature is in search for belongingness and love, Frankenstein abandons his friends and family, shunning the basic human need for love in favor of self-serving intellectual pursuits. Discuss with students the possibility that the creature is not villainous but in fact a foil who ultimately exposes Frankenstein as the true antagonist.

- **For discussion:** Though the creature becomes a murderer to retaliate against Frankenstein for abandoning him, Frankenstein repeatedly endangers the lives of his friends and family in order to accomplish his goals. Who do you sympathize with the most? Why? Who do you think is right? Use examples from the text, especially those that reveal Frankenstein’s or the monster’s character traits, to explain your answer.
- **For discussion:** The creature is widely considered to be the novel’s antagonist. However, many of his actions and feelings highlight his blamelessness, especially compared to Frankenstein’s selfish carelessness. Do you think the creature is actually an antagonist? If not, who do you think is the novel’s antagonist and who the hero? Give examples from the text to explain your answers.

The Creature as a Satanic Figure: The novel repeatedly draws a comparison between the creature and Satan from John Milton’s Paradise Lost. The creature even prefers Paradise Lost to all of the other texts he reads during his time with the De Laceys. He later tells Frankenstein that Satan is “the fitter emblem of my condition” than Adam. However, despite the creature’s criminality, he is often depicted as a tragic and blameless victim of Frankenstein’s irresponsible ambition.

- **For discussion:** Follow the creature’s predominant character traits throughout the course of the novel. What motivates his hatred of humanity? Why does he murder William and Elizabeth?
- **For discussion:** Is the creature’s desire for revenge evil? Why or why not? What evidence can you find to support your opinions?

The Responsibility of Creation as a Theme: The responsibility of creation is an important theme throughout the novel. The novel raises the question of who should be permitted to create. Victor Frankenstein commits a blasphemous act against God and nature when he bestows “animation upon lifeless matter.” As a result, he is later deprived of the ability to naturally create offspring with his wife, who is murdered by the creature.

- **For discussion:** While assembling the body of the creature’s future female companion, Frankenstein describes his scientific lab as a “workshop of filthy creation.” However, at the beginning of the novel, he describes his experiments as being admirable and almost divine. Why does Frankenstein’s attitude about creation change so much? How does his opinion of himself change?
- **For discussion:** The creature is angry with Frankenstein for abandoning him after giving him life. What does the creature think Frankenstein should have done instead? What is the novel’s argument about the responsibilities of creators? Do you agree? Why or why not?
Gender Role Imbalance: Frankenstein is full of ambitious, adventurous men: Robert Walton is on a quest to the North Pole, Victor Frankenstein searches for the secret of life, and Henry Clerval aspires to be a “gallant and adventurous benefactor of our species.” Even the creature explores the world and educates himself. In contrast, every female character remains exclusively in the domestic sphere and primarily functions as a channel of action for men. They are passive, submissive, and dependent. Events and actions happen to them, usually to teach men some sort of lesson.

- For discussion: Margaret Saville is perhaps the most passive female character in the novel; we know of her existence only through Robert Walton’s letter. We do not even know if she receives or responds to the letters. What does Margaret’s passivity suggest about women’s roles during Mary Shelley’s time? What would change about the novel if Margaret’s character were more fully revealed, either directly or through responses to Walton’s letters?
- For discussion: Because of Frankenstein’s structure, there is no objective narrative voice; Shelley’s women are described and narrated by male characters. How might this affect their portrayal, both in their social roles and as individuals? Why might Shelley have chosen to filter the narratives of female characters through the perspective of male characters? Had Shelley’s women been given direct access to the narrative, what might have changed?
- For discussion: Overall, Mary Shelley depicts the roles of women as highly restricted. Why do you think she, as a woman herself, intentionally represents women as the submissive gender in Frankenstein? Do you think Shelley believed women were inferior or, to the contrary, might her novel subtly argue in favor of feminism? Explain your reasoning.

Additional discussion questions:

- How do symbols of light and fire function in the novel? What themes do they support?
- Why is Frankenstein so interested in science instead of other areas of study? What does his interest in science reveal about his character traits?
- What character traits do Frankenstein and the creature share? What does this reveal about their relationship?

Short-Answer Quizzes: Volume 1: Letters 1-4 Questions and Answers

Quiz Questions

1. What did Walton read during his childhood?
2. What ambition of Walton’s ended in failure?
3. How did Walton prepare for his expedition?
4. What is the one thing Walton feels is missing from his life?
5. What did the ship’s master do for his fiancee?
6. To what poem does Walton allude?
7. Why has Victor traveled so far north?
8. What does Walton say that causes Victor to call him an “unhappy man”?
9. How does Walton feel about Victor?
10. Why does Victor decide to tell his story?
Quiz Answers

1. Walton read his uncle’s books about expeditions to the Arctic.
2. Walton says he failed in his ambition to be a poet.
3. Walton prepared for his expedition by enlisting as a sailor on whaling ships; studying math, science, and medicine; and getting used to cold, hunger, thirst, and lack of sleep.
4. Walton feels he is missing the companionship of a true friend.
5. The ship’s master gave his fortune to the man his fiancee loved and left Russia so the two would be free to marry.
7. Victor has traveled north in pursuit of the other man on a sledge Walton and the sailors saw from the ship.
8. Walton says he would sacrifice everything to gain the knowledge he seeks.
9. Walton feels great affection and sympathy for Victor and says he has come to love him like a brother.
10. Victor decides to tell his story because he believes Walton might be able to draw a useful moral from it.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Volume 1: Chapters 1 and 2 Questions and Answers

Quiz Questions

1. Where does Victor grow up?
2. Who is Beaufort?
3. Who is Elizabeth Lavenza?
4. Who is Henry Clerval?
5. To what does Clerval aspire?
6. What does Victor say is the “genius that has regulated [his] fate”?
7. What book does Victor discover at the inn?
8. What discovery does Victor believe would bring him glory?
9. What does Victor witness during the storm at Belrive?
10. Why does Victor decide to give up natural philosophy?

Quiz Answers

1. Victor grows up in Geneva, Switzerland.
2. Beaufort was a friend of Victor’s father, Alphonse, as well as the father of Victor’s mother, Caroline.
3. Elizabeth Lavenza is Victor’s adopted sister, whom he calls his “cousin.”
4. Henry Clerval is Victor’s best friend.
5. Clerval aspires to be remembered as a brave and adventurous hero whose actions benefit humanity.
6. The “genius that has regulated [Victor’s] fate” is natural philosophy.
8. Victor believes discovering the elixir of life would bring him glory.
9. Victor witnesses the destruction of an oak tree by lightning.
10. Victor decides to give up natural philosophy because he believes it is a “would-be science” through which no real knowledge can ever be achieved.
Short-Answer Quizzes: Volume 1: Chapters 3, 4, and 5 Questions and Answers

Quiz Questions

1. What event delays Victor’s departure for Ingolstadt?
2. Why doesn’t Clerval accompany Victor to the university?
3. Who are M. Krempe and M. Waldman?
4. What leads Victor to decide to return to his study of natural philosophy?
5. What does Victor discover how to do?
6. Where does Victor gather materials from which to build the creature?
7. How long does Victor spend building the creature?
8. Why does Victor flee from the creature?
9. Who nurses Victor back to health during his illness?
10. From whom does Victor receive a letter after he recovers?

Quiz Answers

1. Victor’s departure is delayed by the death of his mother from scarlet fever.
2. Clerval’s father wants him to join the family business rather than pursue a liberal education.
3. M. Krempe and M. Waldman are Victor’s professors of biology and chemistry, respectively.
4. Victor decides to return to his study of natural philosophy after hearing a lecture by M. Waldman on the achievements of modern chemistry.
5. Victor discovers how to bring inanimate matter to life.
6. Victor gathers materials from charnel-houses, slaughterhouses, and dissecting rooms.
7. Victor spends almost two years building the creature.
8. Victor flees from the creature because he finds his creation hideous.
9. Clerval nurses Victor back to health.
10. Victor receives a letter from Elizabeth.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Volume 1: Chapters 6 and 7 Questions and Answers

Quiz Questions

1. Who is Ernest?
2. Who is Justine Moritz?
3. Who is William?
4. What do Victor and Clerval study together?
5. How does Victor feel when he and Clerval return from their trip?
6. What news does Victor receive from his father’s letter?
7. Where does Victor see the creature?
8. Who is going to be tried for murder?
9. Why does Elizabeth blame herself?
10. Why doesn’t Victor tell anyone who the real murderer is?
Quiz Answers

1. Ernest is Victor’s younger brother.
2. Justine Moritz is the Frankenstein family’s servant and friend.
3. William is Victor’s youngest brother.
5. Victor feels happy and carefree when he and Clerval return from their trip.
6. Victor receives the news that William has been murdered.
7. Victor sees the creature in Plainpalais.
8. Justine Moritz is going to be tried for murder.
9. Elizabeth blames herself because she lent William the valuable necklace he was wearing the night of his death. Since the necklace was missing from William’s body, it appears that stealing it was the murderer’s motivation.
10. Victor doesn’t tell anyone who the real murderer is because he thinks people would believe he was mad.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Volume 2: Chapters 1 and 2 Questions and Answers

Quiz Questions

1. How does Victor often spend his nights at Belrive?
2. How have Justine and William’s deaths affected Elizabeth?
3. Why does Victor want to see the creature again?
4. Where does Victor decide to travel?
5. What mountain does Victor decide to climb in spite of the storm?
6. To whom does the creature compare himself?
7. What does the creature say has made him a fiend?
8. What does the creature ask Victor to do?
9. What threat does the creature make?
10. Why does Victor agree to accompany the creature to his hut?

Quiz Answers

1. Victor often spends his nights at Belrive alone on Lake Geneva.
2. Elizabeth is deeply saddened and disillusioned after Justine and William’s deaths.
3. Victor wants to see the creature again so he can avenge Justine and William by killing him.
4. Victor decides to travel toward the valley of Chamounix.
5. Victor decides to climb Montanvert.
6. The creature compares himself to “the fallen angel,” or Satan.
7. The creature says misery has made him a fiend.
8. The creature asks Victor to listen to his story.
9. The creature threatens to ruin Victor’s life, murder more of his loved ones, and become a scourge on humanity.
10. Victor agrees to accompany the creature to his hut out of a mixture of curiosity, compassion, and a sense of duty.
Short-Answer Quizzes: Volume 2: Chapters 3, 4, and 5 Questions and Answers

Quiz Questions

1. How is the creature treated by the villagers?
2. Who are Felix and Agatha?
3. What reason does the creature discover for the cottagers’ sadness?
4. How does the creature help the cottagers?
5. What does the creature want to do before revealing himself to the cottagers?
6. How does the creature imagine the cottagers will react to him?
7. What does Felix call Safie?
8. How does Safie’s arrival affect the cottagers?
9. What book does Felix read to Safie?
10. What does the creature privately love to call the cottagers?

Quiz Answers

1. The villagers chase the creature away by throwing stones and other “missile weapons” at him.
2. Felix and Agatha are a brother and sister who live with their father in the cottage attached to the hovel where the creature is hiding.
3. The creature discovers that the cottagers are suffering from poverty and hunger.
4. The creature helps the cottagers by gathering firewood for them and clearing snow from their path.
5. The creature wants to master the cottagers’ language before revealing himself to them.
6. The creature imagines the cottagers will at first be horrified by his appearance but will come to love him for his kindness.
7. Felix calls Safie his “sweet Arabian.”
8. Safie’s arrival dispels the cottagers’ sadness and fills them with joy.
9. Felix reads to Safie from Volney’s *Ruins of Empires*.
10. The creature privately loves to call the cottagers his “protectors.”

Short-Answer Quizzes: Volume 2: Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 Questions and Answers

Quiz Questions

1. Why doesn’t Safie’s father want her to marry Felix?
2. What books does the creature find in the forest?
3. With which character in the books he finds does the creature most identify?
4. What does the creature find in the pocket of the coat he took from Victor’s apartment?
5. How do Agatha, Safie, and Felix react to the creature?
6. What does the creature do to the cottage?
7. Where does the creature decide to go after he leaves his hovel?
8. Why does the creature initially seize William?
9. What does the creature demand of Victor?
10. Where does the creature say he will go if Victor agrees to his demand?
Quiz Answers

1. Safie’s father, who is Muslim, doesn’t want her to marry a Christian.
2. The creature finds *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch’s *Lives*, and the *Sorrows of Werter*.
3. The creature most identifies with Satan from *Paradise Lost*.
4. The creature finds a journal Victor kept while creating him.
5. Agatha faints, Safie runs away, and Felix tears the creature off De Lacey, throws him to the ground, and hits him with a stick.
6. The creature burns the cottage down.
7. The creature decides to go to Geneva to find Victor.
8. The creature initially seizes William in order to make him his friend.
9. The creature demands that Victor make him a female companion.
10. The creature says he will go to the South American wilderness with his companion.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Volume 3: Chapters 1 and 2 Questions and Answers

Quiz Questions

1. Who does Victor want to meet with in England?
2. What does Victor agree to do immediately upon his return from England?
3. Where does Victor meet Clerval?
4. What poem does Victor quote to describe Clerval’s reaction to the scenery?
5. How does Clerval remind Victor of his former self?
6. What is Clerval’s goal when he and Victor are in London?
7. Why does Victor accept the invitation to Perth?
8. What does Victor fear while he and Clerval are traveling to Scotland?
9. Where does Victor rent a hut in which to complete his work?
10. What does Victor fear while working on the creature’s companion?

Quiz Answers

1. Victor wants to meet with an English philosopher whose discoveries he believes will help him to create the creature’s companion.
2. Victor agrees to marry Elizabeth.
5. Clerval is, as Victor once was, “inquisitive and anxious to gain experience and instruction,” delighted by his new surroundings, and pursuing a long-held goal.
6. Clerval’s goal is to travel to India to assist with European colonization and trade.
7. Victor wants to see the natural beauty of the region and to complete his work somewhere in the Scottish Highlands.
8. Victor fears the creature will murder his family in Geneva or, if he has followed Victor, that he will murder Clerval.
9. Victor rents a hut on one of the remotest of the Orkney Islands.
10. Victor fears that the creature will appear at any moment.
Short-Answer Quizzes: Volume 3: Chapters 3 and 4 Questions and Answers

Quiz Questions

1. Why does Victor destroy the female creature?
2. What does the creature tell Victor to remember just before he leaves the hut?
3. What does Victor receive from the fisherman?
4. Where does Victor come ashore after being lost at sea?
5. How does Victor react to seeing Clerval’s body?
6. Who is Mr. Kirwin?
7. Who comes to visit Victor in prison?
8. What piece of evidence allows Victor to be released?
9. What is the “one duty” that remains to Victor?
10. What is the one thing that allows Victor to get enough rest to stay alive?

Quiz Answers

1. Victor destroys the female creature because he is afraid she could turn out to be just as or more dangerous as the first creature. He also fears that the two might have children, thereby creating a new race of “devils.”
2. The creature tells Victor to remember that he will be with him on his wedding night.
3. Victor receives a letter from Clerval asking Victor to meet him in Perth so they can return to London together.
5. Victor reacts by throwing himself on Clerval’s body and asking in horror if his “murderous machinations,” which have already destroyed two other people, have also destroyed his friend. He then begins to convulse and spends two months in a state of fever and delirium.
6. Mr. Kirwin is the local magistrate. He believes Victor is innocent and treats him with kindness.
7. Victor’s father, Alphonse, comes to visit him in prison.
8. The evidence that allows Victor to be released is the fact that he was on the Orkney Islands when Clerval’s body was found.
9. The one duty that remains to Victor is to return to Geneva to protect his family and destroy the creature.
10. The one thing that allows Victor to get enough rest to stay alive is laudanum.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Volume 3: Chapters 5 and 6 Questions and Answers

Quiz Questions

1. Why do Victor and Alphonse stop in Paris on their way to Geneva?
2. How does Alphonse respond when Victor insists that he really is responsible for the deaths of William, Justine, and Clerval?
3. What request does Elizabeth make of Victor in her letter?
4. What does Victor promise to do the day after their wedding in his letter to Elizabeth?
5. Where do Victor and Elizabeth travel on their wedding night?
6. What does Victor expect the creature to do on the night of the wedding?
7. How does Alphonse react to Elizabeth’s death?
8. Where does Victor spend several months after Elizabeth’s murder?
9. How does the magistrate respond to Victor’s demand that the creature be brought to justice?
10. How does Victor respond to the magistrate?

**Quiz Answers**

1. Victor and Alphonse stop in Paris so that Victor can rest.
2. Alphonse changes the subject, convinced that Victor is deranged.
3. Elizabeth requests that Victor be honest with her if he loves someone else or thinks of her as a sister rather than as a romantic partner.
4. Victor promises to divulge his terrible secret to Elizabeth.
5. Victor and Elizabeth travel to an inn in the town of Evian on their wedding night.
6. Victor expects the creature to kill him.
7. Alphonse cannot bear the news of Elizabeth’s death. He is unable to leave his bed and dies a few days after Victor’s return.
8. Victor spends several months in a solitary cell in a hospital, recovering from a breakdown.
9. The magistrate says that he will attempt to have the creature captured but that, based on Victor’s description of him and the fact that the creature’s whereabouts are unknown, this will probably prove impossible.
10. Victor becomes enraged and declares that he will devote his life to getting revenge on the creature, then storms out of the magistrate’s house.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Volume 3: Chapter 7 Questions and Answers**

**Quiz Questions**

1. What place does Victor visit on the night of his departure from Geneva?
2. How does the creature respond to Victor’s decision to live?
3. How does the creature help Victor to follow him?
4. What is the only thing that brings Victor joy as he pursues the creature?
5. How does Victor become stranded on the ice?
6. What does Victor ask Walton to do for him if he should die?
7. What advice does Victor give Walton and the sailors when the ship is trapped in ice?
8. What does the creature ask Victor even though he knows Victor cannot answer?
9. How does the creature feel about himself?
10. What does the creature plan to do after leaving Walton’s ship?

**Quiz Answers**

1. Victor visits the cemetery, specifically his family tomb.
2. The creature responds by telling Victor that he is satisfied with Victor’s decision.
3. The creature leaves Victor food and notes written on tree bark and stones.
4. The only thing that brings Victor joy is dreaming of his home and his dead loved ones, whom he sometimes convinces himself are still alive.
5. Victor becomes stranded when the ice breaks while he is pursuing the creature across the frozen sea.
6. Victor asks Walton to finish his task of destroying the creature if the captain should ever come across him.
7. Victor advises Walton and the sailors to stick to their purpose and keep sailing north rather than turning back.
8. The creature asks Victor to forgive him for destroying his life.
9. The creature hates himself and believes that he is the most miserable and malignant being on earth.
10. The creature plans to travel as far north as possible, build himself a funeral pyre, and die in the flames.