

# FRANKENSTEIN

## PRESENTATION

*Frankenstein* follows Victor Frankenstein's triumph as he reanimates a dead body, and then his guilt for creating such a thing. When the "Frankenstein monster" realizes how he came to be and is rejected by mankind, he seeks revenge on his creator's family to avenge his own sorrow. Mary Shelley first wrote *Frankenstein* as a short story after the poet Lord Byron suggested his friends each write a ghost story. The story so frightened Byron that he ran shrieking from the room.

**Written by:** Mary Shelley.

**Type of Work:** novel.

**Genres:** Gothic Literature; Romantic Movement.

**First Published:** In 1818.

**Setting:** Narration begins in Russia then transitions to Geneva, Switzerland where the events surrounding Victor Frankenstein and the Monster are chronicled. The setting switches often, but the majority is set in Europe.

**Main Characters:** Victor Frankenstein; The Monster; Elizabeth Lavenza; Justine Moritz; William Frankenstein; Henry Clerval; Margaret Saville; De Lacey Family; Robert Walton.

**Major Thematic Topics:** treatment of the poor and uneducated; use of knowledge for good or evil purposes; invasion of technology into modern life; the restorative powers of nature in the face of unnatural events.

**Motifs:** danger of knowledge; allusion to Goethe's Faust; obsession; revenge.

**Major Symbols:** the monster; electricity; lightning; weather.

**Movie Version(s):** *Frankenstein (1931); Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1994).*

The three most important aspects of *Frankenstein*:

- Although Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is compelling in and of itself, it also functions on a symbolic level or levels, with Frankenstein's monster standing in for the coming of industrialization to Europe — and the death and destruction that the monster wreaks symbolizing the ruination that Shelley feared industrialization would eventually cause.
- The novel contains a number of "framing devices," which are stories that surround other stories, setting them up in one way or another. Robert Walton's letters to his sister frame the story that Victor Frankenstein tells to Walton, and Frankenstein's story surrounds the story that the monster tells, which in turn frames the story of the De Lacey family.

- *Frankenstein* is a gothic novel. Gothic novels focus on the mysterious or supernatural; take place in dark, often exotic, settings; and yield unease if not terror in their readers. The *double* is a frequent feature of the Gothic novel, and in a sense Frankenstein and his monster are doubles. Some literary historians also consider *Frankenstein* the first science fiction novel.

## CONTEXT

*Frankenstein* is a unique novel in the canon of English literature. The novel seeks to find the answers to questions that no doubt perplexed Mary Shelley and the readers of her time. Shelley presents a unique character in Victor Frankenstein and his creation, the monster. It is as though there are two distinct halves to one character. Each half competes for attention from the other and for the chance to be the ruler of the other half. In the end, this competition reduces both men to ruins.

Shelley also is keenly aware of the concern that technology was advancing at a rate that dizzied the mind of early eighteenth century readers. Perhaps this novel is addressing that issue of advances created by men, but which fly in the face of "natural" elements and divine plans.

Mary Shelley crafts her exquisite novel in a way to direct attention to the treatment of the poor and uneducated as a major theme throughout the book. She would have learned these precepts from her father William Godwin, a noted writer and philosopher. (Refer to the "Life and Background" section.) But the beginnings of the historical background go back much further than Shelley's own time.

To understand Shelley's time period, one must delve into the period that preceded Shelley's. Mary was born in 1797, after the American and French Revolutions. Europe was a tense place for fear of potential political revolutions during much of the period from 1770-1800. The English upper class feared that the French Revolution might spill over to their own country. Many felt that change was necessary to ensure equality among the masses. The wars that Napoleon waged, begun in 1805, essentially quashed any real hope of building a better Europe. However, the seeds of discord were sown for the dissolution of social and class barriers in England and mainland Europe. The cries of "liberty, fraternity, and equality," were left on the impressionable minds of men everywhere. It was thought that man could achieve greater personal liberty, without the threat of overbearing governments. Men also reasoned that brotherhood in a common cause — whether it be social, class, or academic — would lead to a better country and a better government.

England benefited from being linked to Europe, but the English Channel served to slow the pace of the revolution that swept the European continent. English political and social institutions were keenly aware of the wave of feelings that revolution had created in France and the United States. Since English rule was now less dependent on the monarchy than before, the power structure of the United Kingdom was more widely distributed than her European counterparts. The balance that England achieved made for an uneasy peace at home. England was at war with France from 1793 to 1815. The English government made deals with other monarchs in Prussia, Russia, and Austria to keep England from entering into any alliance that might compromise English control of the high seas. The result was criticism of English foreign policy at home by such liberal thinkers such as Lord Byron and Percy Shelley. Both of these men had seen the results of England's turning the other cheek from the repression that they saw in Austria and Italy. Byron and Shelley felt that the Tory party in England had not done enough to ensure the freedom of the people at large and had essentially "gotten in bed" with the more conservative Austrians and Italians.

The Industrial Revolution also gave rise to a new social class in European society, the middle class. As more businesses moved from home- or cottage-based operations, factories became the next place where conflict would be waged between the working poor and their employers. New towns sprang up with a new set of problems for local governments. Few checks and balances existed for factory owners or governments. As a result, town life was forbidding and dangerous. The countryside yielded little relief from city life, as small farmers had to make a living on small plots of land, in contrast to large landowners. Usually, the old gentries had ruled the land for many years previous, and they controlled the larger portions of land, thus regulating its use. The poor enjoyed a better standard of living than previously, but the concerns of the poor and the gap between the rich and poor became more pronounced during this period.

The English government repressed the people at home, fearing a latent revolution and fearing the liberals in the government who supported social and economic reforms. Mary Shelley writes about the ideal society where people aided each other and the less fortunate. Liberal-minded men would ensure that the conditions of those who labored on the farm or in the factory would be tolerable and fair. The Shelley's, both Mary and Percy, adopted these ideas. The proper treatment of the Frankenstein's housekeeper, Justine Moritz, is indicative of Mary's own views of how the laboring class should be treated. Also, the whole De Lacey story line details the French government's imprisonment and banishment, for unclear reasons, of a family who aided a Turkish merchant in their home country. As a result of their assistance, the family has all of their possessions confiscated, and the male members of the family are sent to

prison. Shelley suggests that governments are too powerful and that charges of treason are too easily leveled, without the benefit of a proper trial and circumstantial evidence. The savior is Safie, who uses her own wealth to rescue the De Lacey's from certain poverty.

### **CHARACTER LIST**

**Victor Frankenstein** Creator of the monster. Victor becomes obsessed with the idea of creating the human form and acts upon it. Immediately after creating the monster, he falls into a depression and fear. He leaves the school and returns home to his family, only to find tragedy there. Not fully aware of the consequences of his creating a new human, he spends his entire life trying to destroy the same creation.

**The monster** The creature created by Victor Frankenstein while at the University of Ingolstadt. "Formed into a hideous and gigantic creature," the monster faces rejection and fear from his creator and society. The monster's rejection from society pushes him to commit murder against his creator's family.

**Henry Clerval** Victor's best friend who helps Victor in his time of need. The monster kills Henry after Victor breaks his promise of creating a female companion for the monster. He studies language at the University of Ingolstadt and is totally unaware of Victor's creation.

**Elizabeth Lavenza** The orphan child taken in by the Frankenstein family and lovingly raised with Victor. Elizabeth later becomes Victor's wife and is killed by the monster on their honeymoon. She is a champion for the poor and underprivileged.

**Alphonse Frankenstein** Victor's father. He suffers from illness probably brought on from his advanced age and depression from the events that have happened.

**Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein** Victor's mother. Caroline dies of scarlet fever when Victor is 17. Caroline was very involved in charity work — much like [Mary Shelley](#) and her mother Mary Wollstonecraft — especially for families in poverty.

**William Frankenstein** Victor's youngest brother who is killed by the monster. Symbolically, William's murder is the turning point of the novel, when turmoil engulfs the Frankenstein family and all innocence is lost in the family. Also, William's death signals for the reader the end of Victor's belief that his actions can have no consequences.

**Justine Moritz** The housekeeper for the Frankenstein family. Accused of William's murder, Justine is the stolid martyr who goes to her death with grace and dignity. If William's death symbolizes the loss of innocence, Justine's death marks the end of all that is noble and righteous.

**The De Lacey family** M. De Lacey, Felix, Agatha, and Safie. The monster's adopted family. Exiled from France for treason against their government.

**Robert Walton** Arctic explorer on his way to find a Northwest Passage through the Arctic Ocean from Russia to the Pacific Ocean. Robert finds Victor Frankenstein near death, listens to his tale, and records it in letters to his sister Margaret Saville.

**Margaret Saville** Robert's sister. Robert writes to her detailing the events that transpire on the voyage and Victor's story.

### **SUMMARY**

The novel begins with explorer Robert Walton looking for a new passage from Russia to the Pacific Ocean via the Arctic Ocean. After weeks at sea, the crew of Walton's ship finds an emaciated man, Victor Frankenstein, floating on an ice flow near death. In Walton's series of letters to his sister in England, he retells Victor's tragic story.

Growing up in Geneva, Switzerland, Victor is a precocious child, quick to learn all new subjects. He is raised with Elizabeth, an orphan adopted by his family. Victor delights in the sciences and vows to someday study science. Victor prepares to leave for his studies at the University of Ingolstadt, when his mother and Elizabeth become ill with scarlet fever. Caroline dies from the disease, and Elizabeth is nursed back to health.

At the university, Victor meets his professors M. Krempe and M. Waldman. For two years, Victor becomes very involved with his studies, even impressing his teachers and fellow students. He devises a plan to re-create and reanimate a dead body. He uses a combination of chemistry, alchemy, and electricity to make his ambition a reality.

After bringing the creature to life, Victor feels guilty that he has brought a new life into the world with no provisions for taking care of the "monster." He runs away in fear and disgust from his creation and his conscience. The monster wanders the countryside while Victor seeks solace in a tavern near the university. Henry Clerval appears to save Victor and restore him to health.

Alphonse writes to Victor telling him to come home immediately since an unknown assailant murdered his youngest brother, William, by strangulation. Justine Moritz, their housekeeper, is falsely accused of the murder of William, and she goes to the gallows willingly. Victor knows who the killer is but cannot tell his family or the police. He journeys out of Geneva to refresh his tortured soul and visits Mount Montanvert when he sees the monster coming to confront his maker with a proposition — "make me a mate of my own." Victor refuses, and the monster asks that his part of the story be heard. The pair retreats to a small hut on the mountain where the monster tells his story.

The monster has taught himself to read and understand language so that he can follow the lives of his "adopted" family, the De Lacey's. While the monster wanders the woods, he comes

upon a jacket with a notebook and letters that were lost by Victor. From the notes, the monster learns of his creation. He has endured rejection by mankind, but he has not retaliated upon mankind in general for his misfortune. Instead, he has decided to take revenge on his creator's family to avenge the injury and sorrow he endures from others.

Victor refuses to make a second monster, but is convinced when the monster assures Victor that he will leave Europe and move to South America. Victor agrees to begin work on a second creation and makes plans to go to England and Scotland, with Henry Clerval, to begin his secret work. Before he leaves Geneva, Victor agrees to marry Elizabeth immediately upon his return from the British Isles. Victor takes up residence in the Orkney Islands, off the coast of Scotland. Victor destroys his project and goes out to sea to dispose of the remains. The monster vows revenge on Victor not upholding his end of their bargain.

While at sea, Victor's boat is blown off course by a sudden storm, and he ends up in Ireland. Henry Clerval's body has washed up on the shores of Ireland, and Victor is set to stand trial for murder. Fortunately, Mr. Kirwin, a local magistrate, intercedes on Victor's behalf and pleads his case before a court, which then finds Victor innocent of the crime. Victor is miserable knowing he has caused the deaths of so many, but recovers enough to finalize the plans for his marriage to Elizabeth.

With a wedding date set, Victor torments himself with the thought of the monster's threat to be with him on his wedding night. The wedding goes off as planned. While Victor makes sure he covers all possible entrances that the monster could use to get into the wedding chamber, the monster steals into Elizabeth's room and strangles her.

Victor now wants revenge and chases the monster through Europe and Russia. Victor nearly catches the monster near the Arctic Circle when Robert Walton discovers him. Victor, now near death, is taken aboard Walton's ship to recover from exhaustion and exposure.

The monster appears out of the mists and ice to visit his foe one last time. The monster enters the cabin of the ship and tells Walton his side of the story. Victor dies, and the monster tells Walton that he will burn his own funeral pyre. The monster then disappears in the waves and darkness, never to be seen again.

**QUIZZES for practice:** <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/frankenstein/quickquizhub.html>