

Lessons 9-12 Novel Study - *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* by Mary Shelley  
Published by Bantam Books (or any edition of the 1818 publication)

1. a. Link to the Author: Mary Shelley

Mary Shelley was born on August 30, 1797 in London, England. Her parents were freethinking radicals; their home was often visited by philosophers, poets, and writers. Among these visitors was the romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley whom she ran away with at the age of sixteen. Mary's own life was similar to a Gothic tale filled with tragedies; one tragedy was the death of her husband Percy at the age of twenty-four. Though often overlooked as a literary figure during the romantic era, her novel *Frankenstein* remains today a classic. Despite many suitors Mary chose to remain a widow until her death in 1851.

- b. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the original telling of the story, one will not find a hunchbacked sidekick, nor grisly details of body parts and desecrated graves, nor great detail of bizarre, futuristic scientific equipment. Also missing is "Dr. Frankenstein" himself; Victor Frankenstein was a student when he created the creature. Young Victor claims to have philanthropic intentions; he is certainly no mad scientist. Further inaccuracies in the celluloid versions include the personage of the creature. He is nothing of the slow-witted, creaking, ponderous fellow of movie fame; instead, he speaks eloquently and pointedly. This synthesis of monstrosity and intellect instill in the reader a much wider array of feelings towards the monster than simply fear or disgust. While such obtuse details may make for popular filmography they utterly diminish the entire point of Shelley's great work. If you have ever seen any of the movies made about the monster, forget them now. You are about to read the original, the story as it was meant to be known, a story chilling in its possibilities and its indictments.

It is interesting to note that the idea for this story arose from a ghost story contest. The game took place during vacation in the Swiss Alps, a truly sublime arena for what must have been as eloquent and imaginative a storytelling contest as any in history. While the others' efforts soon dissipated into the mountain air Shelley's mind quickly formed her masterpiece with the very zeal, fervor, and celerity that the young Victor (Frankenstein) formed his.

c. Major characters in *Frankenstein*:

Robert Walton: an explorer on an expedition in the Arctic

Victor Frankenstein: the creator of the "monster"

William Frankenstein: Victor's youngest brother

Justine Moritz: an orphan girl who lives with the Frankensteins

Henry Clerval: Victor's close friend

Elizabeth Lavenza: an orphan girl whom the Frankensteins adopt; Victor's bride-to-be  
 M. Waldman: the professor who urges Victor to study modern science  
 Frankenstein's "monster": Victor's creation

- d. In reading stories and novels one should always try to look for themes or main ideas woven throughout the story. A theme may be as simple as the beauty and power of nature, or more complex, such as one character's transgression of natural law. *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley has both of these themes and others.

Begin today by reading Letters 1-4 of Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

- e. Letter 1  
 To whom is Robert Walton writing?
- f. What seems to be Walton's motivation in his exploration?
- g. Letter 2  
 What does Walton feel is missing in his life?  
 Note the allusion Walton makes to Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."
- h. Letters 3 and 4  
 What predicament does Walton and his crew find themselves in late July?
- i. Describe the three major events that occur within hours of each other.
- j. Despite his enfeebled condition what does the stranger ask of his rescuers before allowing himself to be drawn into the ship?
- k. What soon becomes Walton's impression of the stranger?
- l. Although we don't know what has happened to the stranger what does he say about his life?
- m. Walton's regard for the stranger increases magnanimously over the days and weeks that follow. At one point he refers to the stranger as a "divine wanderer." Why do you think he holds the man in such high revere?

When reading stories with narrators within the action be aware that the narrators are not necessarily entirely reliable. With Walton's letters to his sister Shelley has created a framework narrative for the novel. Note that at the end of the fourth letter we have a second narrator.

2. a. Read Chapters 1-2.

- b. Chapters 1-2  
Find Geneva on a world map. Note its geographical relationships with surrounding countries.
  - c. Give brief descriptions of Elizabeth Lavenza, Henry Clerval, and young Victor (Frankenstein).
  - d. Reread the final paragraph of Chapter 2. Are you willing to accept Victor Frankenstein's portrayal of his childhood?
  - e. Chapter 3  
Although he knows natural philosophers like Magnus and Paracelsus to be of little worth why does Victor still prefer these writers to modern philosophers?
  - f. What changes Victor's mind?
3. a. Read Chapters 4-5.
- b. Chapter 4  
What is the abrupt change in Victor's manner once he begins his studies at Ingolstadt?
  - c. Why does Victor intensively study physiology—a practice that, in his words, is “irksome and almost intolerable”?
  - d. Since we already know the final result of Victor's discovery (from his own words, “destruction and infallible misery”), what general, predominant conflict do you predict for this novel? (e.g., Man vs. Man, Man vs. Self, etc.)
  - e. What do you think is the driving force behind Victor's endeavors?
  - f. How does Victor feel, in retrospect, of his frenzied scientific pursuits?
  - g. Chapter 5  
How does Victor's attitude towards his creation change?
  - h. How does Henry Clerval assist Victor? What does he give up for his friend?
4. a. Read Chapters 6-8.
- b. Chapter 6  
Give some differences between Henry and Victor.
  - c. What effect does Henry have on Victor?

- d. Chapter 7
    - Make sure that you are keeping track of the time throughout the story. How much time has passed since Victor's experiment came to horrible fruition and his reception of his father's letter informing him of William's death?
  - e. As you read this novel make a note of Victor's extreme, almost oblivious, arrogance. Give a few examples of this so far.
  - f. When Victor sees the creature during the storm what are his immediate assumptions regarding this brother and the creature's actions? What do you think of these assumptions?
  - g. What action does Victor take when he hears that Justine has been arrested for the murder of William? Explain his actions.
  - h. Chapter 8
    - What is the evidence against Justine?
  - i. What are your thoughts regarding Victor's reaction to the conviction?
5. Write one or two paragraphs explaining why you think Victor feels the way he does about the creature. Are his feelings rational or irrational, well founded or unfounded? Try to place yourself in Victor's position and imagine how you might respond to the situation.