Introduction to *Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, Or the Modern Prometheus* is perhaps the most famous monster story ever told. The novel has had countless film and television adaptations and has become a staple of the Halloween celebration; however, our cultural understanding of *Frankenstein* is often quite different than the reality of Shelley's narrative.

Brainstorming Activity: Use Peardeck (access code **TBD**) to record your answers to the following questions: What characteristics come to mind when you think of Frankenstein? What is your understanding of the Frankenstein story?

We will come back to your answers to these questions as we read the novel to see how popular media has vilified the Creature and simplified the themes of this story.

Background: Mary Shelley

Mary Shelley is considered to be the inventor of science fiction genre. She was the daughter of William Godwin, a famed politician and philosopher, and Mary Wollstonecraft, an Enlightenment thinker and early advocate for women's rights.

At age 16, she eloped with British Romantic author Percy Bysshe Shelley (who was married to someone else at the time), and the two traveled around Europe together. After quickly running out of money, they moved to Switzerland with a group of author friends, including the prolific Romantic poet Lord Byron. The group decided to have a ghost story contest; *Frankenstein* was Mary's submission. Needless to say, she won the contest.

A portrait of Mary Shelley by Richard Rothwell (Source: Wikipedia)

Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein* in 1818 (when she was only 18 years-old) anonymously, and at the time, people attributed the novel to her husband because he wrote its introduction. In 1823, she released a new edition of the text where she took

credit for its authorship and wrote a new introduction. Although she wrote several more novels and short stories before her death in 1853, *Frankenstein* remains her most well-known work.

For more information on the life of Mary Shelley, [please visit this website.](please-visit-this-website)

Historical Context: The Scientific Revolution

Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* during a time of great transition in the history of Western thought. This transition began with the Scientific Revolution, a period from the early 1500s to the mid-1700s when Science became a separate discipline from Philosophy and Technology with the goal of improving the world we live in and the quality of life for humanity (what Britannica refers to as "utilitarian goals"). Logic, reasoning, and observable evidence became the marker of fact rather than blind acceptance of what were considered "universal truths;" this idea became a precursor to the period of the Enlightenment. Nature and the larger Universe, rather than being mysterious forces beyond human comprehension, were now considered something humans could understand through observation and experimentation. Scientific institutions and journals, led by such minds as Nicholas Copernicus and Sir Isaac Newton, were established to share new, important findings with the public; this led to rapid advancements in fields such as medicine, chemistry, and astronomy.

With these rapid advancements in Science came great anxieties, which play an important role in *Frankenstein*. The opposition to scientific progress often cited that the pursuit of such knowledge and experimentation, especially regarding living creatures, attempted to put humans on an equal level with God, which was considered an abomination. More important than theological questions, however, were questions on morality of scientific pursuits: Does the ability to carry out an experiment mean that it should be done (i.e., should we do something just because we can?) What responsibilities do scientists have when their experiments have serious repercussions? What happens when the ambition of scientists overshadows their sense of moral responsibility? Shelley, who was very well-read in the sciences, previews answers to these questions in *Frankenstein.*

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Frankenstein: Introduction

For more information on the Scientific Revolution, [please visit this website](#). For more information on the role of science in *Frankenstein*, [please visit this website](#).

> **Discussion Questions**: Now that you know more about the anxieties surrounding the Scientific Revolution, how do you think these anxieties will be reflected in *Frankenstein*? What issues do you think Victor Frankenstein's scientific pursuits and ambition might cause?

Gothic Influences in *Frankenstein*

Although *Frankenstein* is considered the first science fiction novel, the narrative is obviously influenced by the Gothic tradition of literature. Gothic fiction is characterized by its evocation of terror, supernatural elements (especially ghosts and vampires), haunted architecture, madness, and secrets. Like Romanticism, the Gothic genre is a reaction to the Enlightenment period's extreme emphasis of logic and reason; it accordingly focuses on the pleasures of extreme emotion, especially in terror or fearfulness. The same feelings of pleasure readers experienced in reading a Gothic novel are experienced today with modern audiences' fascination with horror movies. Gothic fiction also calls back to the Gothic style of architecture and the pleasure people got from looking at the ruins of Gothic castles, mansions, etc. These ruins were tied with the inevitability of human death and decay, which is another characteristic of Gothic literature. Famous works of Gothic literature include Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.*

As we read *Frankenstein*, we will refer back to this definition and discuss the Gothic elements of the novel. For more information on Gothic literature, [please visit this website.](#)

Frankenstein's Epigraph

The **epigraph**, or short quotation at the beginning of a text from another work, in the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein* is from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1663). *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem that dramatizes Satan's fall from heaven and the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. If you're not familiar with this story, [please visit this website.](#)

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> *Did I request Thee, Maker, from my clay*
>
> *To mold me Man? Did I solicit Thee*
>
> *From Darkness to promote me?*

Epigraph Questions: Before You Read

1. Who is the speaker of this quote, and to whom is he speaking?
2. What is the speaker trying to convey to his audience?
3. What events or interactions do you think this quote might foreshadow?
   a. What broad topics does it address that might relate to the plot of *Frankenstein?*
   b. Do you think these topics hint at any overarching themes of the novel?

Epigraph Questions: As You Read

1. What passage(s) from the novel do you think best reflect the themes of the epigraph?
2. Why might the Creature confront Victor Frankenstein in the same way that Adam confronts God in *Paradise Lost*? What is his reasoning?

Epigraph Questions: After You Read

1. Now that you've finished the novel, what function do you think the epigraph serves?
2. How did analyzing the epigraph before you started the novel help you better understand the themes of *Frankenstein*? What insights did you gain?