

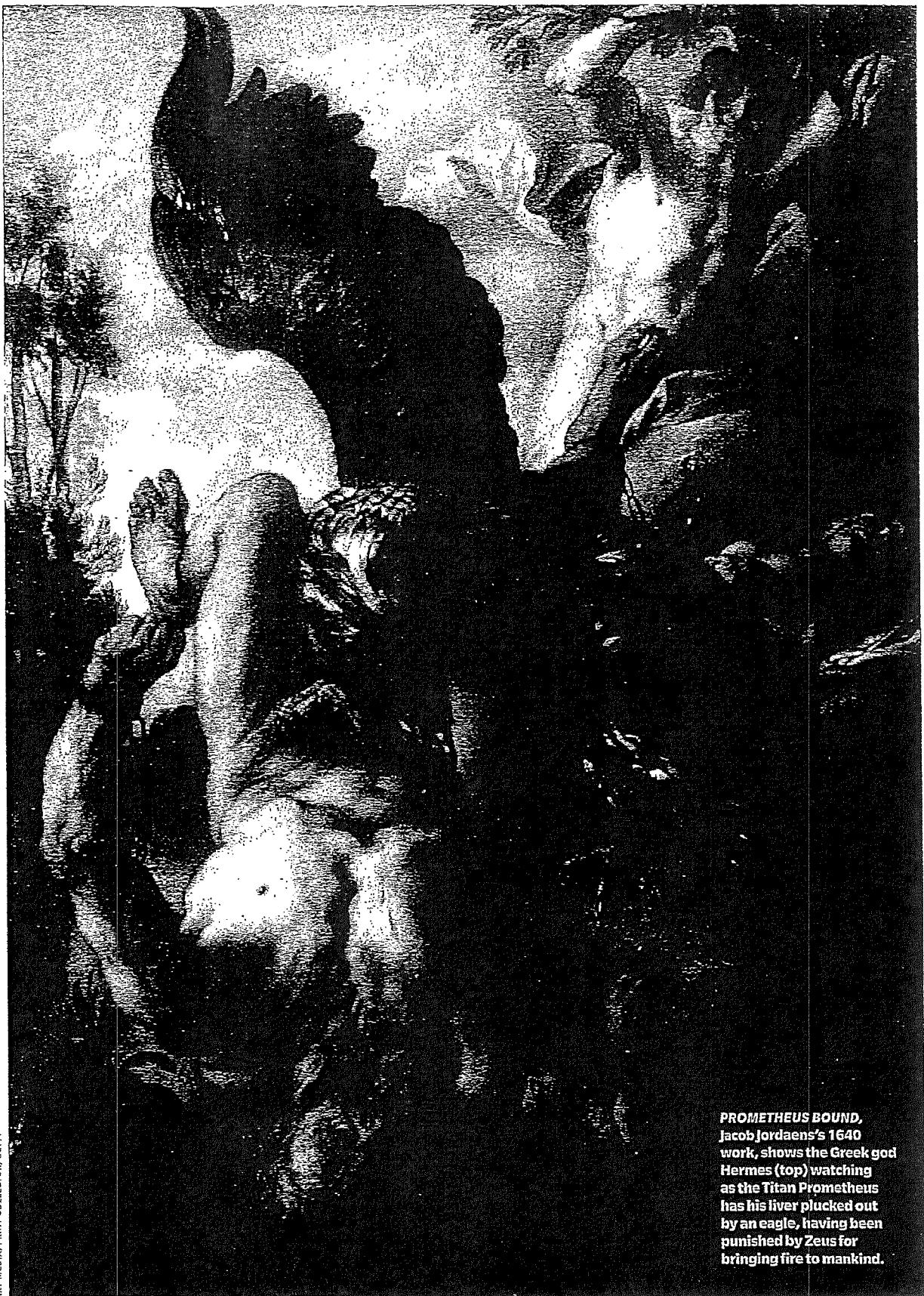
# Study Guide to *Frankenstein* (or *The Modern Prometheus*) by Mary Shelley

Published 1818

Genre: Gothic



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**PROMETHEUS BOUND,**  
Jacob Jordaens's 1640  
work, shows the Greek god  
Hermes (top) watching  
as the Titan Prometheus  
has his liver plucked out  
by an eagle, having been  
punished by Zeus for  
bringing fire to mankind.



# THE MYTH OF Frankenstein

How ancient stories inspired the monster—  
and why mad science keeps him alive

*"Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me man? Did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?"*

—JOHN MILTON, PARADISE LOST

IN ANCIENT GREEK MYTHOLOGY, THE TITAN NAMED Prometheus stole fire from his fellow gods and gave it to humans, a species that he'd single-handedly created out of clay. In response to this transgression, the sky-and-thunder god Zeus lashed the rebel deity to a rock, where he was doomed to spend every day having an eagle eat his liver, which then regenerated—over and over again.

Throughout the centuries, this story has inspired the feverish imaginations of many poets and artists—not least William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, George Gordon Byron (Lord Byron), and Percy Bysshe Shelley in 18th- and 19th-century Britain. Reacting against the rationalism of the Age of Enlightenment and the inhuman modernization of the Industrial Revolution, they were proponents of Romanticism, the artistic movement emphasizing individualism, the past, nature, subjectivity, and emotion—all of which are richly reflected in the Prometheus myth.

In 1816, Byron published "Prometheus," a poem celebrating the deity's defiance of conventional morality. A few years later, Shelley wrote the play *Prometheus Unbound*, which upended the classic myth by punishing Zeus and setting the fire-bearer free. And it was Shelley's wife, Mary, who in 1818 published a novel—*Frankenstein*—subtitled "The Modern Prometheus." Celebrating its 200th anniversary this year, the book (like its monster) never seems to die. The novel focuses on Dr. Victor Frankenstein, who reflects Prometheus's creation of humanity by bringing dead tissue back to life, creating a monster who wreaks havoc on the world—hardly a reflection of the Romantic ideal. Rather than celebrating rebellion against the status quo as the liberation of the individual, Mary Shelley turned human hubris into a cautionary tale.

Such stories had been told before—among them the medieval legend of the golem, about a creature created from clay in Prague's Jewish ghetto, and Goethe's 1797 poem "The

Sorcerer's Apprentice," in which a novice dabbles disastrously in magic. But these involved the invocation of supernatural powers. Mary Shelley's novel put the focus on mankind and its developing faith in science. "*Frankenstein* is much more an examination of the Romantic ideals...than a scary story about supernatural beings and unexplained phenomena," Leslie S. Klinger, editor of *The New Annotated Frankenstein*, tells LIFE. "In fact, there's absolutely nothing supernatural about it, which is perhaps why it is best characterized as the first science fiction novel rather than a horror story."

Still, *Frankenstein* is mostly known as a terror tale—thanks largely to James Whale's 1931 film starring Boris Karloff. And as the 20th century progressed, Shelley's story increasingly reflected real-life terrors brought about by man's meddling with matter. Little more than a decade after *Frankenstein* premiered, for instance, the theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer presided over the creation of the atomic bomb, which led to the obliteration of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. According to a new edition of Shelley's novel annotated for "scientists, engineers, and creators of all kinds," the guilt that Victor Frankenstein feels after seeing the destruction his creature has wrought is "reminiscent of...Oppenheimer's sentiments when he witnessed the unspeakable power of the atomic bomb."

The fears fostered by the new atomic culture influenced a series of movies in the 1950s—*Godzilla* and *The Attack of the 50-Foot Woman* among them—that reflected *Frankenstein* by showing the monstrous consequences of scientific overreach. Though many of these films—including a glut of *Frankenstein* sequels—were ridiculous on the surface, they reflected real anxieties that have only grown in the face of nanotechnology, genome editing, robots, and genetically modified crops known as—yes—*Frankenstein* foods. "As Shelley's book suggests," says Klinger, "there really *are* monsters out there, and some of them are of our own making." ■

As you read, take notes according to the following categories. Remember to use your time wisely and highlight. You should only include your own words here.

Genre	Gothic	
	Science Fiction	
Context	Socioeconomic/ Industrial Revolution	
	Economic Philosophical	
	Religion	
	Social	
	Cultural	
	Novel	
Literary analogies and allusions	Paradise Lost	
	The Rime of the Ancient Mariner	

# The Industrial Revolution

The 18th century saw one of the biggest-ever changes in the way people lived and worked. Before this time, most people lived in the countryside and worked on farms. But in the mid-18th century, large-scale industry was established, offering ways of making an endless variety of products by using machines. Soon, most people lived in towns and cities and worked in factories manufacturing goods. The industrial revolution had arrived.

## A big leap forward

This kind of large-scale industry was made possible because a number of inventions and changes had all happened in Britain at around the same time.

One was the development of the steam engine, perfected by the Scottish engineer James Watt (1736–1819) in the 1760s. One steam engine could power lots of machinery, and could keep going continuously—all it needed was a steady supply of coal, and engineers were busy building a network of canals up and down the country, so that this heavy fuel could be transported easily and cheaply to the factories. At the same time, inventors were devising all kinds of machines that could be powered by steam. The textile industry, for example, had previously employed thousands of home-workers, who spun thread and wove cloth by hand using spinning wheels and hand looms. By Mary Shelley's time, this work



**James Watt**  
Scotsman  
James Watt's improvements to steam engines made them efficient power sources for industrial machinery.

was being done by steam-powered machinery. One person could operate several machines, each of which did the work of many home-workers.

## Social changes

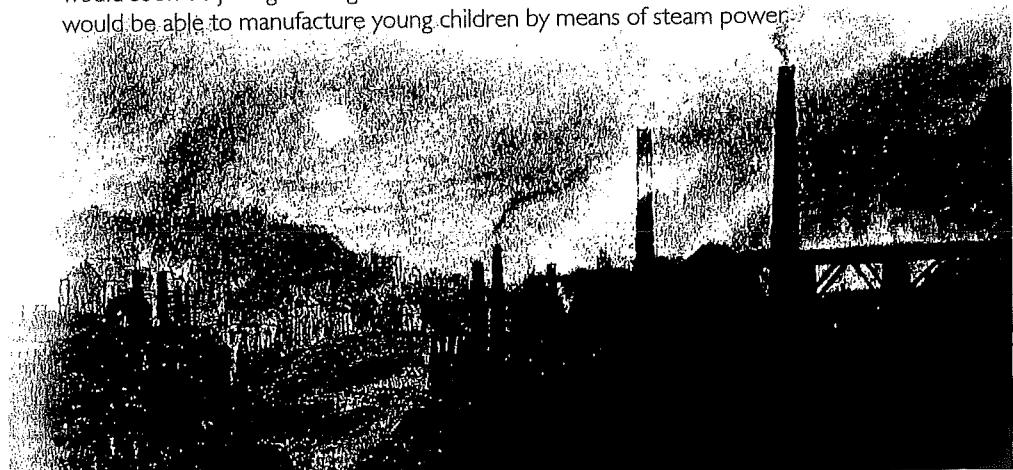
All this meant huge changes for working people. Thousands moved to the cities to work in the factories. The conditions were unpleasant—the machinery was noisy, the factories were dark, and the hours were long. It was dangerous, too. Many people lost arms or hands that got caught in the machinery. And the housing provided by factory owners for their workers was often cramped and inadequate. But people came to the factories because that was where the jobs were. Old-fashioned craftworkers, by contrast, were no longer in demand.

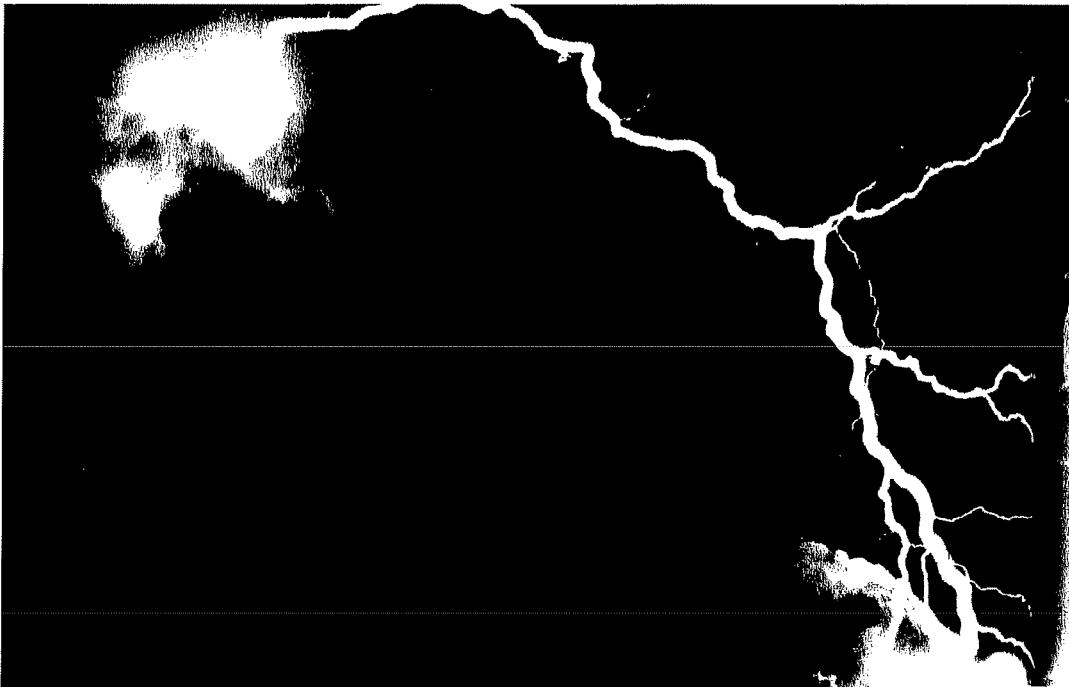
## Making a protest

Although he was a member of the upper class and did not have to work himself, Mary Shelley's friend Lord Byron knew all about the problems faced by traditional workers. In his home county of Nottinghamshire, many people had made their living by knitting socks and stockings by hand at home. Now this work was done by machinery and the knitters had no money. Some of them rioted, destroyed the factory machines, and faced the death penalty, or prison, for their vandalism. Byron stood up for them, and made a speech in the House of Lords, arguing that the authorities should be merciful because the people had lost their livelihoods. But he could not turn back the tide—the factories were here to stay.

## A world of possibilities

Mary Shelley would have heard a lot about the developments in industry—not only from Byron but also from her father's friend, the scientist Erasmus Darwin (see pp.98–99). Darwin was one of a group of thinkers, scientists, and industrialists who met regularly in the Birmingham house of Matthew Boulton (1728–1809), manufacturer of steam engines. The group, which included Boulton's business partner, the engineer James Watt, and scientists such as Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), one of the discoverers of oxygen, discussed a range of subjects, including both scientific discoveries and the progress of industry. They saw the new technologies of the industrial revolution as opening up all kinds of opportunities. Anything seemed to be possible. Mary Shelley must have caught some of this enthusiasm, and this sense that anything was possible, even something as amazing as making a living "human" being from body parts, makes the story of *Frankenstein* believable. By the time the third edition was published in 1831, railways hauled by steam locomotives were being built and the possibilities of technology seemed endless. People would soon be joking that ingenious inventors would make machines that would be able to manufacture young children by means of steam power.





Lightning  
People have  
always been  
fascinated by  
thunderstorms,  
but in the  
18th century  
scientists first  
realized that  
lightning is  
caused by  
electricity.

## Science In Mary Shelley's time

What was the secret of life? What was it that made the difference between a living thing and something lifeless? In Mary Shelley's time, scientists thought a lot about these questions and so does Victor Frankenstein, whose research begins with the question, "Whence...did the principle of life proceed?" One answer that the scientists of the 18th century came up with was electricity. Although they had not yet discovered how to generate electricity, they knew that lightning was an electrical phenomenon. In 1800, the Italian scientist Alessandro Volta (1745–1827) created the first battery.

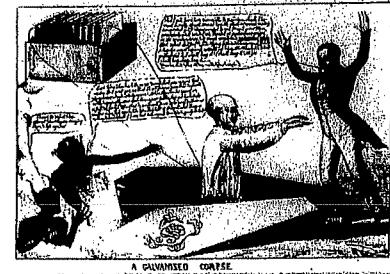
### Animal electricity

In the late 18th century, another Italian, Luigi Galvani (1737–98) carried out some experiments with dead frogs. He found that when he touched the frogs' legs with metal rods, the legs twitched. Galvani thought that the reason for this was that the bodies of the frogs contained "animal electricity." We now know that animals do produce electricity, but not in the way Galvani supposed. What was probably happening with Galvani's frogs was that contact with the metal rods was causing a chemical reaction in the legs and this reaction produced electricity. In other words, the metal rods turned the frogs' legs into a simple battery.

### SCIENCE IN MARY SHELLEY'S TIME

#### Galvanism

Volta called the magical movement of the frogs' legs "galvanism." Many people believed Galvani's explanation of it, and thought that electricity was the mysterious force that gave animals the spark of life. Some even believed that if electricity was the "vital spark," then applying an electric current to a dead creature would bring the corpse back to life. Galvani's nephew Giovanni Aldini (1762–1834), was a keen supporter of the idea. He used one of Volta's batteries to apply a current to the bodies of dead animals. When their muscles twitched like the frogs' legs, he went on to try the experiment with human corpses, sometimes in public demonstrations of his work. The same thing happened. It looked as if the dead bodies were on the point of coming back to life. Aldini also used electrical currents to try to treat people with mental illnesses, and sometimes he was successful.



Galvanism  
Angry devils look on as a 19th-century scientist uses electricity to bring a corpse back to life in this engraving.

#### Erasmus Darwin

In Britain, one of the most famous scientists to show an interest in galvanism was Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802). Some of his ideas about the development of living species were surprisingly close to those his grandson, Charles Darwin, developed in his famous theory of evolution. Erasmus Darwin carried out experiments with galvanism, and also wrote about how creatures such as worms might be created from non-living material. The scientist was one of the many friends of Mary Shelley's father, William Godwin, and he was also much admired by Mary's husband, Percy Shelley. She recalls in her Introduction to *Frankenstein* how she and her friends discussed Darwin's work, and wondered whether a corpse could be brought back to life with a "powerful engine," in other words an electrical device such as one of Volta's batteries.

#### Frankenstein's science

In the novel, Victor Frankenstein is fascinated by electricity and its power. In Volume One, Chapter 2 he watches a tree being struck by lightning and afterwards a scientist friend explains to him the exciting theories of galvanism. Frankenstein uses these ideas when he gives life to his Creature, discovering how to do so after days and nights of solitary, obsessive work. Although many scientists did not believe in theories of "animal electricity," such ideas were well known at the time and would not have seemed quite as odd to Mary Shelley and her friends as they do to us. They would have shared some of Frankenstein's fascination with the power of electricity and its apparent ability to bring the dead to life.

# Horror stories

Frankenstein's sinister plot, its concern with dead bodies, and its accounts of weird scientific experiments, make it seem more like a modern horror story than a 19th-century novel. But in fact Mary Shelley's book was part of a vogue for stories about ghosts, the supernatural, and the uncanny that began in the 1760s and carried on for several decades. These books are usually known as Gothic novels. None of them are now as famous as *Frankenstein*, but many were very popular when they were first published.

## Gothic novels

Gothic novels deal mostly with ghosts and the supernatural and they are set among castles, graveyards, and in dramatic, often mountainous scenery. The first Gothic novel to appear was *The Castle of Otranto*, which was written by English author Horace Walpole (1717–97), a rich man who was the son of the British Prime Minister Robert Walpole. Its characters include ghastly apparitions, giants, and a statue that seems to come to life. The book was published in 1765 and was immediately popular and over the next few decades, other writers wrote Gothic stories. The most successful examples included *The Monk*, by M. G. Lewis (1775–1818), in which a monk breaks his vows and ends up sentenced to death and damnation for his sins, and *Vathek*, by William Beckford (1759–1844), a story set in Arabia about a sultan who has the power to kill people just by looking at them.

## The Gothic setting

Many of the Gothic novels were set in castles, abbeys, and similar buildings of the medieval period. The architectural style of these buildings—using pointed arches, stone vaults, and features such as stained-glass windows—was itself known as Gothic. The style had been current between the 13th and 15th centuries, and it became fashionable again in the 18th. Both Horace Walpole and William Beckford lived in elaborate Gothic-style houses that they built to satisfy their passion for the medieval period. Beckford's house, called Fonthill Abbey, was



modeled on the kind of church in which some Gothic novels were set. *Frankenstein*, with its graveyards and charnel houses, has a similar kind of setting. Its use of dramatic mountain scenery (see pp.234–235) is also typical of the work of the other Gothic writers.

### Why Gothic novels?

Many writers liked the Gothic style for the same reason that some movie-makers like to produce horror films today—because it enabled them to explore all kinds of subjects that were outside the scope of ordinary, realistic stories. Readers liked the style because Gothic tales were usually gripping and included lots of moments that were surprising or scary. But not everyone admired Gothic fiction. Some people thought the characters unbelievable and the stories silly. Two prominent novelists, Jane Austen (1775–1817), in *Northanger Abbey*, and Thomas Love Peacock (1785–1866) in *Nightmare Abbey*, had a good time mocking the Gothic novel, all its horrific props and devices, and the people who read this kind of fiction so enthusiastically.

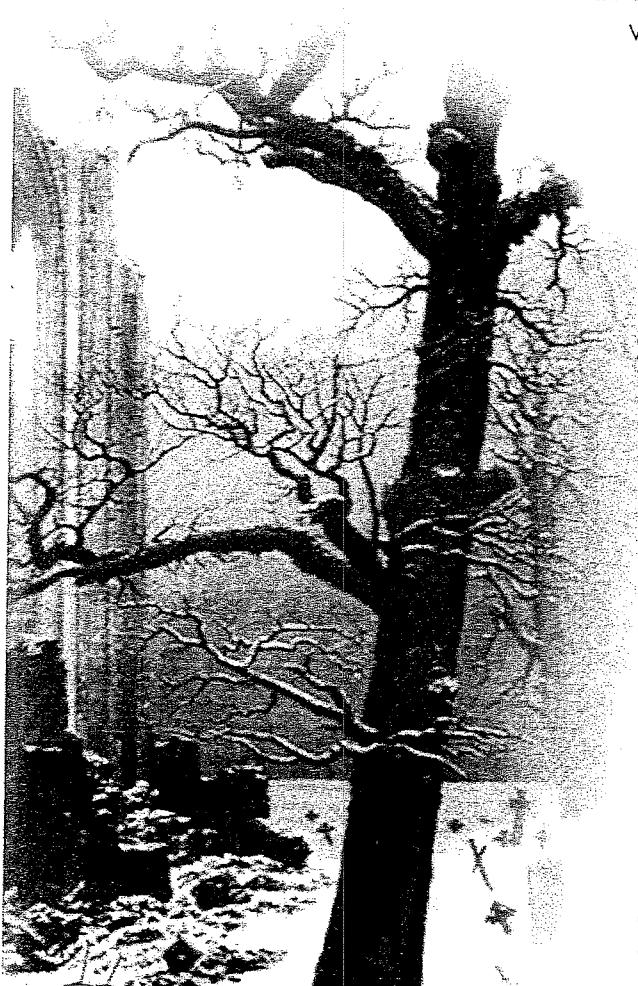
### Frankenstein and the Gothic

Mary Shelley does not mock the Gothic mode in *Frankenstein*. Like her husband and friends, she was a keen reader of the ghost stories by German writers that she discovered during her stay in Switzerland. As a result, she rose to the challenge when Lord Byron suggested that all the members of their group should write a ghost story of their own. She proved to be at least as good at

shocks and surprises as any other writer of her time. She includes vivid, atmospheric descriptions of "Gothic" scenery, such as the towering castles by the Rhine River in Germany, and powerfully depicts the horrific appearance of the Creature as a hideous, mummy-like being, so sinister that it must have magical powers. Victor Frankenstein himself turns into a broken, Gothic character who describes himself as "a restless spectre," in other words, little more than a ghost.



Grotesque Medieval sculptors, and their later imitators, liked to carve grotesque monsters on the outsides of their churches—a perfect inspiration for writers of horror stories.



### Gothic ruin

18th-century horror stories were often set among ruins like this, their tall pointed arches typical of Gothic architecture.

# Context of the period

Many people's view of the Victorian era is of a society that was staid and conservative, with lots of restrained tea parties and minor family scandals all conducted in stiff, uncomfortable clothing. However, the Victorian era was also one of great change and vitality. The rise of industrialisation and the factory forever altered how and where people lived. The study of fossils and the theory of evolution shook the Victorians' most profound and central beliefs. Underneath a frequently repressive social code was something far less austere and genteel; in London alone there were 8000 prostitutes. This kind of contradiction was typical of the Victorian period: Victorian values were proudly enshrined, but extraordinary social unrest was ignored; national success was boasted about, but not the colonial and working class exploitation upon which it was based. No wonder the literature of the period is so rich.

The Victorian era can be broken up into three broad periods. The early Victorian period (1830–48) saw significant social turmoil and the movement of people from rural to urban centres. The middle period (1848–70) was characterised by greater economic confidence, but religious uncertainty. The late period (1870–1901), particularly the 1890s, marked a decay of Victorian values and apprehension about what would come next. Writers of the time termed this period the fin-de-siècle (end of the century).

Towering over the period is the figure of Queen Victoria. She became queen in 1837 and then reigned until her death in 1901. A key event in her life was the early death of her beloved husband, Prince Albert. Upon his death she entered into several decades of mourning, to the eventual bemusement of many of her people. Indeed, much of the surface austerity of the period can be symbolised by the remote, forbidding figure in black that was Queen Victoria for much of her life.

Many people in Victorian London had to endure appalling working and housing conditions.



## Socioeconomic context

The shift from rural to urban work accelerated with the rise of mechanisation and factories. Conditions for the mass of workers were appalling. Indeed, many workers were treated less like humans and more like biological cogs in the machine. Adults and children worked side by side for sixteen hours per day on repetitive, arduous and dangerous tasks. The housing was little better: giant, unsanitary, rat-infested, crowded slums grew up in the major cities and towns, particularly in the north of England.

Such conditions were fertile ground for literary works; Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (extracted on pages 141–2), Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* and John Ruskin's *Unto this Last* all dealt with this phenomenon. An extract from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem 'Cry of the Children' (1844) is provided on page 126. The poem was thought by many of her contemporaries to be overstatement, but it was based on factual reporting of five-year-old children who worked sixteen hours a day moving coal carts.

### CRY OF THE CHILDREN

'True,' say the children, 'it may happen  
That we die before our time!  
Little Alice died last year—her grave is shapen  
Like a snowball, in the time ...'  
It is good when it happens', say the children,  
'That we die before our time!' ...

.....  
For, all day, we drag our burden tiring,  
Through the coal-dark underground—  
Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron  
In the factories, round and round ...

.....  
How long," they say 'how long, O cruel nation,  
Will you stand to move the world, on a child's heart'

### Economic–philosophical context

The way industrialists justified these conditions was by applying two philosophies that were reasonable in theory but can be seen as harmful in their effects. These philosophies came to embody much of the Victorian era. The first was Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism, which advocated 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number' and judged an act on the basis of how much 'pleasure' and how much 'pain' it caused. If an act created more pleasure than pain, then it was justified. The theory was mathematical, reasonable and unemotional. It allowed individual misery to be subsumed into the greater good of (economic) progress. The other theory was laissez-faire, which stated that economic progress was best attained by unregulated working conditions. It presumed that economic progress of the entire society ultimately benefited everyone, including the workers, because the wealth would trickle down to them.

Legislation and social activism throughout the Victorian period slowly improved the lot of many people. The franchise (right to vote) was extended in the 1832 Reform Bill to the middle class, but not the working class. The price of bread and corn were reduced when the Corn Laws were repealed in 1846. (These laws had made it very difficult to import cheap grain.) The 1848 Public Health Act, passed in response to a cholera outbreak that killed 53 000 people, instituted a Central Board of Health to improve sanitation, water supplies and sewage. In 1890, the Housing of the Working Classes Act allowed for public housing. However, none of these measures solved the entire problem. For example, at the end of the Victorian era 30 per cent of Londoners were still living in terrible slums.

# Questions

- 1 RECAP: Draw a mind map diagram that outlines the following aspects of Victorian Britain: the period divisions, the nature of work and the philosophical underpinnings of the economic society.
- 2 How does Barrett Browning attempt to create sympathy for the children in her poem? Look at the subject matter and the poetic techniques.
- 3 Do you find this extract stark or sentimental (or something else)? Explain your answer.
- 3 Imagine a hypothetical society formed with utilitarianism and laissez-faire economics as its base. Do you think in such a society it would be possible to avoid the abuses of Victorian England?

## Religious context

The middle Victorian period was also a time of theological difficulties. Geologists were putting together an increasingly comprehensive fossil record that suggested that the world was far older than the Bible suggested. This caused disquiet enough, as evidenced in a number of Alfred Tennyson's stanzas in his long elegy *In Memoriam* (1850).

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They [geologists] say,  
The solid earth whereon we tread  
In tracts of fluent heat began,  
And grew to seeming random forms,  
The seeming prey of cyclic storms,  
Till at last arose the man ...

10

This is a cold vision indeed for a culture brought up to believe in the Garden of Eden. The poet Matthew Arnold went further, as shown in the following extract from his poem 'Dover Beach' (1867).

### DOVER BEACH

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar ...

25

Seven prominent Anglicans released a book titled *Essays and Reviews*, which expressed doubts about a literal interpretation of accounts in the Bible and suggested that the Bible contained inconsistencies. This caused a storm of protest. However, all this was the calm before the storm. In 1859, Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, and in 1871 *The Descent of Man*, which suggested that humans had evolved from simpler animals. The mental transition from fallen angels to risen apes was possibly one of the most profound collective shocks humanity has ever undergone. Darwin's theories were famously promoted by men such as Thomas Huxley, who coined the term 'agnostic': one who believes that the existence or non-existence of God cannot be demonstrated rationally. Darwin's work was instrumental in leading to the sense of alienation of much modernist writing in the early twentieth century. In the nineteenth century it helped usher in what we have already seen as the uncertainty of the late Victorian period and the fin-de-siècle work of writers such as Thomas Hardy, who wrote the novel *Jude the Obscure*. Other writers, such as Oscar Wilde, wrote of a decadent society that reflected a world in decline.

## Social context

Social life wasn't all gloomy. Many saw London as the most vibrant and cultured city in Europe, and Britain as the most civilised nation in the world. In 1851, Prince Albert (Queen Victoria's husband) organised and opened The Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, which showed off the marvels of Victorian technology. This inspired a great deal of confidence and pride in all things British. The Empire expanded until, by the end of the century, it covered almost a quarter of the globe. Many people were raised into the ranks of the prosperous, or at least comfortable, middle class. Britain was also, relatively speaking, a haven of freedom, particularly freedom of speech. All through Europe, revolutionaries (including Karl Marx) fled to England.

However, in the midst of all this nationalism and legal freedom came a tightening of moral codes. This was due to the evangelical pressure of a number of religious groups, such as Low Church Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists and Congregationalists. Part of this was a reaction against the hedonistic lifestyles promoted by decadent Romantics, such as Lord Byron. This new morality looked back to the Old Testament for its guidance, and also complemented the capitalist idea that frugality and hard work were the basis of success. This code was enthusiastically embraced by much of the emerging (but anxious) middle class because it created and codified for them a covert set of signs to show the world that they were no longer the working class. Sobriety, hard work and moral uprightness all led to that joyless Victorian nirvana: respectability. This was particularly evident in attitudes to female sexuality and the preoccupation with the innocence of young girls. The flipside of this was the figure of the tragic 'fallen woman', whose moments of indiscretion would lead to a lifetime of ruin and disgrace.

Thus, Victorian fiction makes almost no mention of sex. One would believe that couples spent their wedding night having cups of tea, holding hands and gazing mildly at each other. The absence of sex is as telling as its presence, for it shows what is being repressed in the society. Indeed, Victorian society did have its seamy side. The pornography industry was rife and, as we have seen, London had many thousand prostitutes (often middle-class 'fallen' women who could not climb back to respectability).

The emerging financial power of the middle class also presented a problem for the increasingly penniless upper class. To the enduring shock of the aristocracy, it appeared that working hard in Victorian England was often a better way of making money than lounging about. When they realised this, many of the aristocracy set about marrying the middle class, while simultaneously disparaging the middle class for being so bold as to spend what they earned. (These members of the middle class were decried as *nouveau riche*, which literally means 'new rich'.) By playing this double game much of the upper class both remained in credit and kept the middle class in their place.

There were some advances in the position of women in the society, but there was still considerable inequity at the end of the century. Whereas in 1837 none of England's three universities were open to women, by the end of the century they could take degrees in twelve universities or university colleges. Married women were allowed for the first time to own property (under the Married Women's Property Acts 1870–1908). However, they were not allowed to vote until 1918.

## Cultural context

The major forms of literature in the period were poetry, non-fiction prose and novels. Poetry was particularly popular; Tennyson's volume *In Memoriam* sold 60 000 copies in a year. (The rise of the novel is discussed later in this unit.) The other major form of entertainment was drama. Theatregoing was incredibly popular; some estimates have 150 000 people attending the theatre each day in London in the 1860s. Although the period produced the musicals of Gilbert and Sullivan (1880s), the comedies of Oscar Wilde (1890s) and the fin-de-siècle satires of George Bernard Shaw (1890s), few plays of the Victorian period have maintained a critical reputation. In that era, theatre filled the entertainment void that television does today. Much of the work was melodrama. The following extract from the very popular *Black-Ey'd Susan*, written by Douglas Jerrold in 1829, perhaps indicates why many of these works are not studied in the manner of Shakespeare today.

**BLACK-EY'D SUSAN**

*From Act II*

**CAPTAIN CROSSLEE:** Passion hurries me—the wine fires me—your eyes  
dart lightning into me, and you shall be mine.

*[Seizes Susan.]*

**SUSAN:** Let me go! in mercy! William William!

**CROSSLEE:** Your cries are vain! resistance useless!

**SUSAN:** Monster! William, William.

*[William rushes in L., with his drawn cutlass]*

»

# The rise of the novel

Today novels are seen as such an established and robust form of literature that it can be hard to believe that the novel form is really only twice as old as film. Before the mid-1700s there were plays galore, poetry aplenty, but novels almost none. Novels began tentatively with practitioners such as Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, but it was the increased literacy in England in the nineteenth century that helped to fuel their rise. It may also be that the novel turned out to be the most useful and adaptable literary form for conveying the texture of life and social dynamism in the nineteenth century.

The serialisation of novels also had a huge impact on their popularity. A single novel was too expensive for most people. (In the mid-1800s a well-bound novel cost thirty-one shillings and sixpence a week, whereas a good weekly working class wage was thirty shillings a week.) Thus, many novels were serialised in monthly magazines. This serialisation also made Victorian novels more like the modern-day soap opera than the modern-day work of literature. Many mid-century novels (including Dickens's *Bleak House*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Little Dorrit*) run to over 1000 pages each. This is because each of these was published in twenty monthly instalments. A Victorian began reading a serialised novel and didn't finish it for over a year and a half. This serialisation meant that, just as in contemporary television serials, cliffhangers were needed in order to ensure that people bought the next copy. To a later audience these can seem melodramatic or sentimental.

Sales figures of these novels in Victorian times were like ratings figures and could vary wildly. Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* in 1840–41 sold up to 100 000 copies per instalment, whereas his later novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in 1843–44, was seen as a relative flop, for some instalments sold only 23 000 copies. A novelist could even see his or her (sales) ratings failing and make adjustments, mid-story, to arrest the decline.

People's tastes were generally fairly fixed. In novels, readers wanted to see their own society reflected or exaggerated. Plot was vital. A moral tone (either overt or covert) was preferable until the very late nineteenth century. Other genres began creeping in as the century progressed. Wilkie Collins pioneered the English detective novel with *The Moonstone* in 1868. Science fiction did not really appear until 1895 with the release of HG Wells's *The Time Machine*, about a man who travels to the earth's far future. However, social realism was the order of the day until the twentieth century.

If you want a good idea of the breadth of the Victorian realist novel in English, the list on page 140 should help. (This is the authors' personal and subjective list.)

## Questions

Refer to the list on page 140 before answering the following questions.

- 1 If you want to resist society, should you pin up this list somewhere and promise to yourself never to read any of them? Why or why not?

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## PART FIVE: CONTEXTS AND CRITICAL DEBATES

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

#### Critical Viewpoint (AO3)

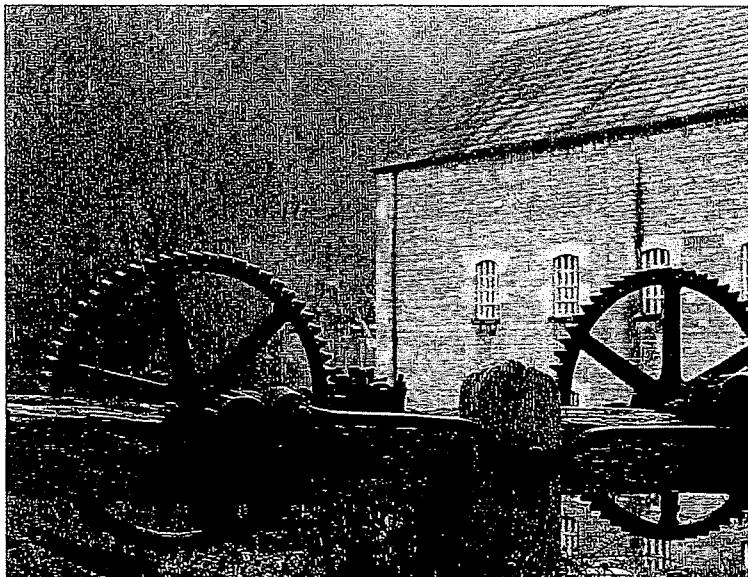
Some critics have suggested Shelley's monster may be read as an emblem of the French Revolution itself: a 'gigantic body politic', as Anne Mellor states, which originated 'in a desire to benefit all mankind' but was so abused 'that it is driven into an uncontrollable rage' (Anne Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, 1988, p. 82).

#### SOCIAL UNREST

*Frankenstein* was written at a time of great changes in British society and deals with a variety of issues central to the development of industrial Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This was a period of significant developments in science and technology and, at least partly as a result of such advances, also a time of social and political upheaval.

Technological developments had a notable impact on people's lives, endangering traditional ways of living in much the same way as scientific developments undermined traditional beliefs. In the first stages of the Industrial Revolution the introduction of new technologies posed a significant threat to the livelihoods of many of the lower classes, frequently prompting violent reactions. The Luddite disturbances of 1811–17, during which factories and mills were attacked and machines destroyed, stirred uneasy memories of the bloodier excesses of the French Revolution of 1789. William Godwin, Shelley's father, initially saw

the French Revolution as the sign of the start of a new era in history with the removal of corrupt institutions. Although its original aims were admirable, the means adopted were violent, and the revolutionaries' execution of the king, traditionally considered the representative of the divine on earth, suggested defiance of God's laws.



The Pentridge uprising of 1817, when 300 men marched towards Nottingham, expecting numerous other such marches throughout the country, was designed to overthrow the government and seemed to confirm the alarming possibility of revolt in Britain. When the leaders of the Pentridge uprising were executed in November, Percy Shelley responded with a political pamphlet deplored the state of a country torn between the alternatives of anarchy and oppression. Mary Shelley had

radical sympathies and, through her depiction of the monster, she reveals an awareness of social injustice and a passionate desire for reform. At the same time, she could not fully support rebellion against the established order, and, again through the monster, expresses fear of the revolutionary violence that injustice in society might provoke.

#### Content (AO4)

#### AO4

A well-known painting showing experiments with respiration is Joseph Wright of Derby's *Experiment with an Air Pump* (1768). Here the scientist has removed the air from a glass globe containing a pet cockatoo; if his hand turns the stop cock in time, the bird will have oxygen and survive; if it does not, it will die.

### SCIENTIFIC DEVELOPMENTS: THE LIFE PRINCIPLE

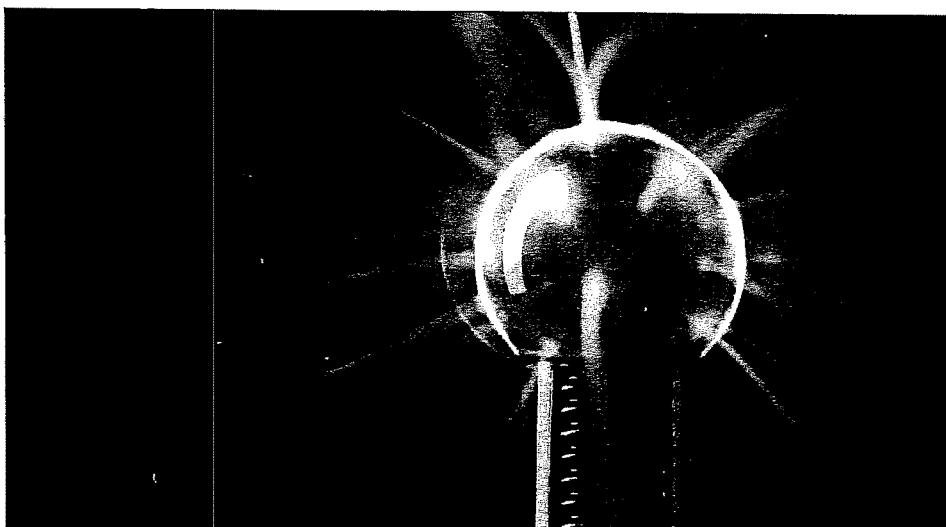
Shelley's *Frankenstein* emerges at least partly out of her familiarity with and understanding of the scientific debates and discoveries of her time. During the later eighteenth century, traditional philosophical and theological investigations into the meaning of life began to be displaced by secular and materialist explorations of life's origins and nature. In 1771, Joseph Priestley observed that mice placed in a bell jar depleted the air and led to suffocation, while sprigs of mint refreshed the air and made the mice lively. Eight years later, Antoine Lavoisier interpreted Priestley's data to provide the first understanding of the processes of respiration. Many scientists, however, remained reluctant to accept a theory that made human life dependent upon the vegetative world: the idea that life might be either maintained or initiated simply through material causes challenged all traditional beliefs about the soul and about humanity's unique position within the world.

By 1814, a debate over what came to be known as the 'life-principle' had caused a rift in the sciences: it was encapsulated in the differing positions of John Abernethy, President of the Royal College of Surgeons, and his pupil William Lawrence, appointed as second Professor at the College in 1815. Lawrence advocated a strictly materialist position. Abernethy, wanting to retain some metaphysical elements in common with religious beliefs, argued that life could not be entirely explained in material terms; something else was required, some vital principle that might be linked to the concept of the immortal soul. In *Mary Shelley* (1988), Anne Mellor demonstrates how closely Shelley relied upon the works of Humphrey Davy, Erasmus Darwin and Luigi Galvani. Davy's pamphlet, *A Discourse, Introductory to a Course of Lectures on Chemistry* (1802), provides Shelley with information about chemistry, with the suggestion that chemistry might provide the secret of life, and with material for Waldman's lectures. Shelley, like Davy, distinguishes the master-scientist who seeks to interfere with and control nature, to modify and change nature's creations, from the scholar-scientist who seeks only to understand.

Unlike Davy, however, Shelley believed the former to be dangerous, and the latter to be the good scientist, exemplified by Erasmus Darwin. Percy Shelley, in his 1818 Preface, refers to Darwin as one of the scientists who have considered such an act of creation possible (p. 12). Darwin, however, like his better-known grandson, Charles, was an evolutionist, not a creationist. He is therefore directly opposed to the fictional Victor Frankenstein who wants to create and change life through chemical means and is not willing to wait for the slow processes of evolution. From this perspective Victor is, like Davy, the bad scientist – the one who interferes with and changes nature. Darwin is the good scientist who only observes and records.

## GALVANISM

It is specifically galvanism, however, to which Mary Shelley refers in *Frankenstein*. In 1791, Luigi Galvani published *Commentary on the Effects of Electricity on Muscular Motion*, suggesting that animal tissue contained a vital force, which he dubbed 'animal electricity' but later came to be known as 'galvanism'. Galvani believed this was a different form of electricity from that produced by such things as lightning, that it was produced by the brain, conducted by the nerves, and produced muscular motion. This theory led to a variety of experiments on human corpses, the most notorious of which was carried out by Giovanni Adimi on the corpse of the murderer Thomas Forster after he was hanged at Newgate. Wires were attached to stimulate galvanic activity and the corpse began to move, giving the appearance of re-animation. Such experiments as this were widely discussed in detail in the popular press, and no doubt influenced Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Drawing upon scientific research, then, Shelley provides a frighteningly believable prediction of what the future might be like in a world where humans hold the secret of life.



### CONTEXT

(AO4)

Percy Bysshe Shelley had a lifelong interest in science, and Dr Adam Walker, who theorised electricity as the spark of life, the soul of the material world, had a particularly strong influence upon him. Shelley conducted various experiments, which apparently led to results ranging from holes in his clothes and carpet to electrifying the family cat.

### CHECK THE BOOK

(AO4)

Susan Lederer's beautifully illustrated *Frankenstein: Penetrating the Secrets of Nature* (2002) offers an excellent introduction to the science of the time, and links this to our contemporary scientific concerns.

① heart attacks

② mental illness

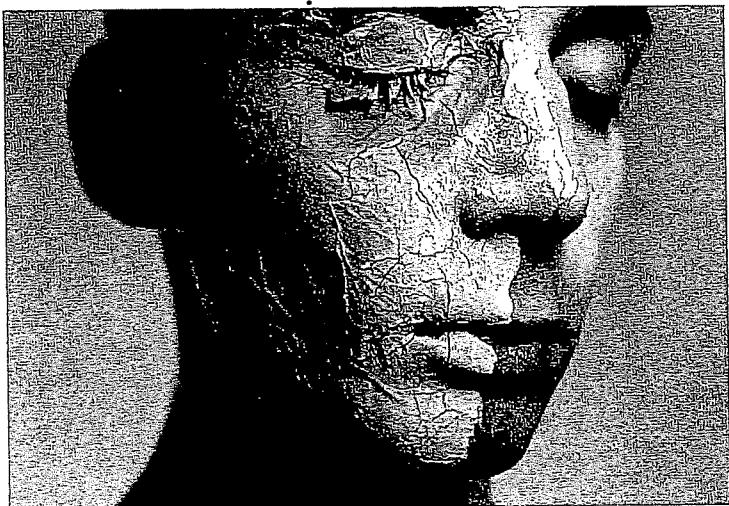
③

## LITERARY BACKGROUND

### ANALOGIES AND ALLUSIONS

*Frankenstein* is full of both analogies drawn between the characters and other figures from literature and myth and allusions to various other texts. Indeed, it could be said that, as the monster is constructed out of fragments of corpses, the text is constructed out of fragments of other texts. The major stories which Shelley appropriates and reworks are Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1798).

#### PARADISE LOST



Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay  
To mould Me man? Did I solicit thee  
From darkness to promote me? (*Paradise Lost*,  
10.743–5)

Shelley chooses for her epigraph a quotation from *Paradise Lost*, one of the books in the monster's library, and this, along with the many other references to Milton's epic poem throughout the novel, suggests the need to keep this story in mind when reading *Frankenstein*. The epigraph immediately encourages us to associate Victor with God and the monster with Adam, and this seems appropriate since, as creator, Victor assumes the role of God, and the 'man' he creates is the monster. However, while the monster certainly fits the role of Adam, he also becomes the demon, assuming the role of Satan, the fallen archangel

who engineers the fall of Adam and brings Sin and Death into the world. When the monster confronts Victor, after the murder of William, he declares that he has been changed by his exclusion from paradise: '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' (p. 103). The monster even echoes Satan's words in *Paradise Lost* at such moments as when he declares to Walton that, after his potential companion had been destroyed, 'Evil thenceforth became my good' (p. 222).

#### CHECK THE BOOK AOB

For further information on the Romantic attitude to Satan, see Kenneth Gross's 'Satan and the Romantic Satan', in Margaret Ferguson and Mary Nyquist, eds., *Remembering Milton: Essays on the Texts and Traditions* (Methuen, 1987).

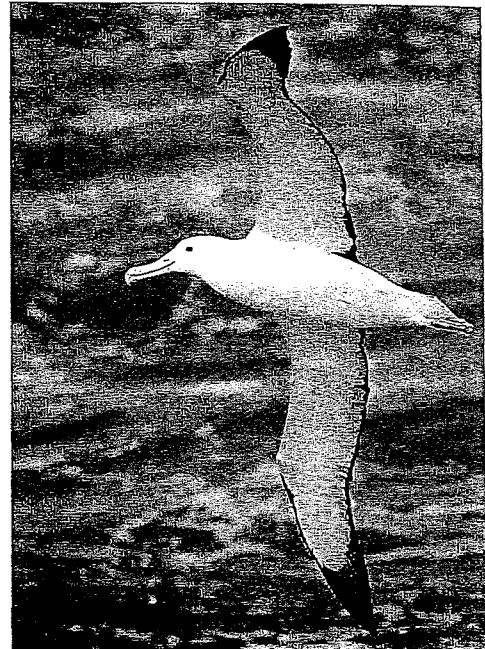
Victor similarly links himself with Satan, the fallen angel, and while the analogy drawn between the monster and Satan focuses attention on the creature's horrific acts of savage violence, the analogy drawn between Victor and Satan focuses attention more on Victor's pride and ambition. In attempting to displace God, he demonstrates the same pride as Satan, who had similar aspirations. Commenting upon his torment of guilt, Victor draws upon the following simile: 'Like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained in an eternal hell' (p. 214). Victor's hell is within him: it is hell as a psychological state, but this is also true of the hell so powerfully described by Satan in *Paradise Lost*.

For the Romantics, Milton's Satan is an interesting, even glamorous figure, nothing like the shadowy figure of the Bible. Percy Shelley even considered that Satan was morally superior to God in Milton's poem, and many of the Romantic poets admired the grandeur and boldness of his aspirations. While Victor must be condemned for the neglect of his creature, it is possible that he too can still be admired for his bold aspirations, his refusal to be satisfied with a mundane and uneventful existence with his family, and his attempt to give humankind a power thought to belong to God alone. To come to that conclusion, however, perhaps we need to be convinced that his work is driven by the desire to benefit others and not by more selfish motives.

## 'THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER'

Coleridge's poem was first published in 1798 in *Lyrical Ballads*. The story concerns an ancient mariner who meets three men on their way to a wedding feast; he detains one and, with his 'glittering eye', holds him while he recounts his story. He tells how his ship was drawn towards the South Pole by a storm and the ship became surrounded by ice. In this world devoid of living things an albatross flies through the fog and the crew greets it with joy. It seems to be a good omen. The ice splits, the ship begins to move, and the bird flies along with it. Inexplicably, the mariner shoots it, and for this act of cruelty a curse descends upon the ship. She is driven towards the Equator and becalmed on a silent rotting sea under the burning sun. The dead bird is hung around the neck of the mariner. Death and Life-in-Death appear, playing dice on a skeleton ship. When it vanishes all the crew die, with the exception of the mariner; he is left alone in an alien world. Moved by the beauty of watersnakes in the moonlight, the mariner blesses them, and the albatross falls from his neck. He is saved, but, in penance, is condemned to travel the world teaching love and reverence for all God's creatures.

The most obvious connection with the story of the ancient mariner is Walton's journey into the frozen wastes of the Arctic; Walton even quotes the poem when the ship is trapped in the ice. However, the mariner's story actually seems to throw more light upon the experiences of the other characters. Like Victor, the ancient mariner defies God. In shooting the albatross he disturbs the natural order: his world, like Victor's, is transformed into a nightmare vision of an alien universe, a meaningless and terrifying wasteland, a world without God. Even after the mariner is forgiven, we are left with the suspicion that this vision of the world may have been prompted by his insight into the truth of the human condition. The monster's experiences may offer a similar insight into a godless world: an irrational, terrifying world managed only by human institutions which are corrupt and individuals who are irresponsible and cruel. Furthermore, like both Victor and the monster, the mariner is an alienated individual. Once he shoots the albatross, he is no longer at peace with himself, and he is shunned by the wider community. Even after he is forgiven, although he becomes aware of the joys of family and community life, he is forced to do penance which keeps him still a solitary, marginal figure, eternally wandering the world. The poem offers a haunting portrayal of the guilt and loneliness that Shelley also captures through the experiences of her characters.



### CRITICAL VIEWPOINT A

'An adequate reading of a literary or other cultural text will need to recognize the significance of the ways it interacts with earlier texts. This involves trying to work out the similarities and differences between the two texts that are momentarily brought together by an allusion' (Martin Montgomery et al., *Ways of Reading*, 1992, p. 159).



## Background

### 1. The Myth of Prometheus

The god who in Greek mythology gave the knowledge of fire to humanity, and suffered severe punishment at the hands of the gods for his generous actions.

Roman myth?

2. Frankenstein the Prometheus iterations/variations/versions. List films, poems, novels that have incorporated this idea of the creation of a monster.

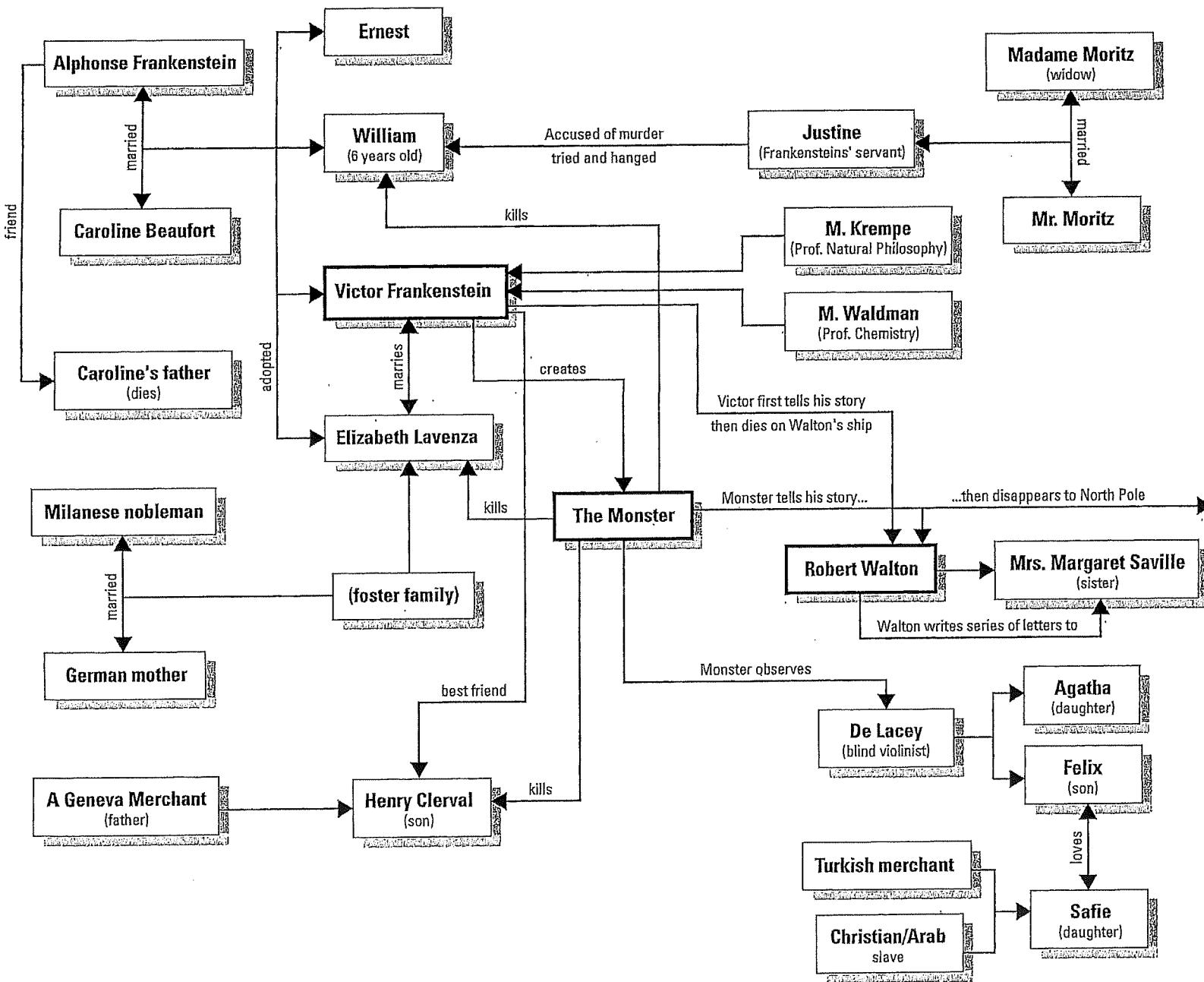
3. “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” Samuel Coleridge

4. Milton *Paradise Lost*

Define or research the following topics:

Stem cell technology	
Biomechanical technology	
Robotic technology	
Rousseau's theory of education	
Feminism in the Victorian age	
Galvinism	

## CHARACTER MAP



# Frankenstein: A Critical Study Guide

J McLaine

the dramatisation. Three more stage versions of *Frankenstein*, including the burlesque *Humgumption; or Dr Frankenstein and the Hobgoblin of Hoxton*, and *Presumption and the Blue Demon* appeared within the year and from 1823 to 1826 at least fifteen dramas employed characters and themes from Shelley's novel.

## **Studying the Gothic**

When studying a Gothic text it is useful to consider certain key cultural and literary oppositions: barbarity versus civilisation; the wild versus the domestic (or domesticated); the supernatural versus the apparently 'natural'; that which lies beyond human understanding compared with that which we ordinarily encompass; the unconscious as opposed to the waking mind; passion versus reason; night versus day. Try applying these oppositions to *Frankenstein* and see where they take you in understanding the essential qualities of this genre.

It is also useful to make a distinction between 'terror' and 'horror': 'terror' is to be thought of as something more shadowy, more insubstantial, harder to pin down, as a suggestion or threat which builds over time; 'horror' stands for a gross physical shock, something which the reader can visualise. 'To awaken thrilling horror' was Mary Shelley's aim with *Frankenstein* (an aim, no doubt, which was more easily achieved with her contemporary reader than with today's). It is worth considering how we can define horror and terror today. It is also worth thinking about how they contribute to the central mood of the Gothic, which is fear. This mood generally has something to do with the past, with 'what comes back', with the revenant or the so-called undead. Usually the ghost that returns has some connection with an evil deed the protagonist has committed in the past, although occasionally there seems little clear reason for the 'return'. Freud identified the unconscious as that place in the mind from which nothing ever goes away and in the novel there is a clear connection with the past, the world of dreams and the unconscious mind. Moreover, guilty thoughts and illicit desires can surface, as

with Victor Frankenstein's dream of his dead mother and Elizabeth.

## **Conventions and Elements of the Gothic**

The novel which is thought to have started the Gothic tradition is Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). It became a popular genre in the late eighteenth century, and its conventions have been used by authors ever since. In the nineteenth century, parodies of the genre started appearing, because its conventions were so widely known. The conventions commonly found elements within Gothic novels include:

A plot which often involves a journey or pursuit.

Symbolism of light and dark.

A psychological element.

An introspective protagonist: brooding, lonely, uncertain, heroic status gained through struggle. Both Victor and the Creature are alienated individuals (see Romantic hero)

The creation of fear as a narrative priority.

Sinister and sublime settings – castles, ecclesiastical buildings, ruins, dungeons, secret passages, winding stairs, haunted buildings, dark and gloomy places, a wilderness, a graveyard, the inhospitable Arctic, rugged mountains, thick forests, generally bad weather.

Omens, ancestral curses and secrets.

Representation and stimulation of fear, horror and the macabre.

Tyrants, villains, maniacs, or simply focusing on the darkness of men's hearts, and other dark and bloody subjects.

Persecuted maidens, femme fatales, madwomen (think of first wives locked away in attics, incestuous sibling relationships, etc.).

Ghosts, monsters, demons, succubus, vampires.

Byronic heroes – intelligent, sophisticated and educated, but struggling with emotional conflicts, a troubled past and 'dark' attributes.

A combination of horror and romance; an appreciation of the joys of extreme emotion, the thrills of fearfulness and awe inherit in the sublime, and a quest for atmosphere.

Use of primitive, medieval, mysterious elements and horrifying, grotesque, supernatural events.

An atmosphere of degeneration and decay.

Early Gothic fiction was popular with female readers and thus explores themes relevant to the implied reader: the curious female (versus the solitary male on his quest for knowledge).

### The Literary and Historical Context

Since the publication of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* Gothic literature has engendered a taste for the distasteful and an appetite for the pleasures of the flesh, although to the modern reader Walpole's giant helmets and speaking pictures now seem rather ridiculous. The works which were perceived in the late eighteenth century as most distinctively Gothic were those of Ann Radcliffe – chiefly *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian* – and *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, though now usually seen as Gothic, appeared a little late in the period and was arguably more concerned with the perils of scientific experimentation than with the problems of ghosts and curses which preoccupied the Gothic. The second wave in the late nineteenth century was, perhaps, an accompaniment to *fin de siècle* notions of decadence and degeneration: Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Later, twentieth-century Gothic writing, from H.P. Lovecraft to Robert Bloch, has continued to test the limits of taste and horror and a penchant for the suburban Gothic has surfaced, particularly in film. Recently, with novels such as Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* and Stephen Bywater's *Night of the Damned* we have the historical Gothic with settings either incorporating the

motif of the haunted house or ranging far and wide with the latter set in the Amazon jungle in the 1930s.

However, to trace the Gothic back to its roots we have to consider the original Goths, who have been credited, at least in part, with the downfall of the Roman Empire and the sack of Rome. Sadly the Goths left almost no written records, and were mostly unheard of until the 'first Gothic revival' in the late eighteenth century. In Britain this revival involved a series of attempts to 'return to roots', in contrast to the classical model revered in the earlier eighteenth century. (Compare the neo-classical poetry of Alexander Pope to that of Wordsworth and you'll see a switch from the ornate and erudite to the relatively plain use of language and structure.)

The notion of the Gothic as a reaction against the neo-classical tradition had a considerable impact during the Romantic period, and influenced almost all the major Romantic writers in different ways. William Blake was an upholder of the Gothic as against the classical and Coleridge's ballad *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is arguably Gothic in its use of supernatural machinery. The earliest writers of the Gothic also made it clear that they were 'against reason' – they did not accept the classic Enlightenment view that humans are mainly driven by rational thought. On the contrary: the Gothic reminds us that we are mainly driven by our passions. This may be a good or a bad thing. It may be a good thing insofar as we might feel emotional intensity towards certain people or causes; it may be a bad thing insofar as it drives us into obsession or madness. At all events, the Gothic deals in illicit desires, in what is prohibited by society, in emotional extremes, whether terror or love, and terrifying forces.

Therefore Gothic texts can be seen as a reaction against the rational discourse that marked the literature and philosophy of The Age of Reason. Instead of Reason and Rationality the Imagination was set free; typified, some might argue, by Victor's overarching ambition. Gothic texts allowed readers to think the unthinkable; to sublimate their innermost desires within the pages of books that were in their very existence an affront to the intellectual establishment. As such

they became a way of subverting the establishment. Novels that were concerned with outsiders and whose protagonists flouted the natural order became the obvious vehicle for attacking the safe, central values of a society that smugly turned its back on those who were not born into the comfort of money, education and power. The power and passion of Gothic literature seemed eminently suited to the iconoclasts, writers such as Lewis, Godwin, Shelley, who wished to challenge the status quo. Often the repressive regime is represented by an ancient order that resists change and any challenge to its autocratic rule. The heroes are those who seek to overturn this authority and establish the freedom to develop their individuality. In this sense the Gothic can echo the early ideals of the Romantic movement which sought to revolutionise society.

From this time on, the Gothic has continued to exert an influence. We can find it in the ghost story, which became extraordinarily popular during the Edwardian period when writers such as Arthur Conan Doyle and M.R. James wrote a number of distinctly Gothic tales. And we can find it in the more contemporary period with the evolution of the horror story in the hands of writers like those already mentioned and in the work of Angela Carter and Neil Gaiman. We can find it too in parodies of the Gothic such as Jane Austen's early nineteenth-century satire *Northanger Abbey*.

### Gothic Language and Setting

The language in Gothic novels tends to be passionate, excessive, emotive; sensational and unrestrained by taste or moderation. The plot is often fantastical and the depiction of character – particularly in the early texts – is often crude. There is, according to some critics, little that is refined, rational or tasteful in the pages of these self-consciously lurid stories. Gothic texts tend to be about transgression, overstepping boundaries and entering a realm of the unknown. In this realm the ordinary is displaced by the extraordinary, the

normal becomes the paranormal and the unconscious is as vivid, vital and valid as the conscious.

In this environment it becomes difficult to orientate one's self: it is often a dark world where winding passages lead deeper and deeper into an uncanny and uncertain world. Forests, wildernesses, extremes of nature predominate. The rational world is left far behind, reason no longer rules. The improbable is entirely possible and the impossible becomes ever more probable. Often the protagonist is presented with a baffling series of choices with no clear sense of what the right one might be and he or she has been removed – either by his or her own actions or by something beyond their control – from the old order of things.

The *ancien régime* (or old order) is frequently exemplified in old buildings: castles, abbeys, towers and so on. These features have become a sort of Gothic shorthand that signifies a past certainty or the dominance and barbarity of yesteryear. These buildings are often peopled by autocratic fathers, uncles, counts and kings.

Paradoxically, Gothic literature also lent itself to those who wished to warn society against the effects of breaking with the natural order: the protagonist, such as Victor, who strayed off the path of reason, order or decorum often came face-to-face with the consequences of their actions rendered all the more terrible in the lurid world of the Gothic text. Darkly attractive strangers who tempt the innocent and naïve are transformed into demonic villains who are only just defeated by some force of righteousness, even a personification of conventional morality, and the weeping victim is led back to safety a wiser and better person. The consequences of transgression are clearly delineated and the boundaries between order and chaos are endorsed and reinforced in the resurrection of an acceptable moral order (see Carter, Bywater).

In each Gothic text there is therefore a clearly defined threshold over which the protagonist and the reader must step. It may be represented as a physical boundary – the dividing line between the civilised and the natural world as in

*Wuthering Heights*. It might be a social line – the girl breaks free from the constraints of her family's expectations and rushes into the arms of some dubious stranger or it might be a moral line where the protagonist breaks a moral law – perhaps, like Victor, he has the temerity to imitate his Maker and breathe life into the inanimate.

Safe in the fictive world of Gothic literature the reader/viewer can vicariously experience the trials of those who have transgressed the boundaries of society, morality or sanity. They, unlike the protagonist, can overstep the margins of reasonable behaviour secure in the knowledge that they retain the power to shut the book, close the text and return to the rational world, albeit one which is all too familiar.

Gothic texts, in contrast, are traditionally set in foreign locations. At first these locations were literally exotic and far away – Italy, Spain, Arabia, Middle Europe but fairly quickly sublime landscapes closer to home were explored – Yorkshire, Scotland, Ireland, the Lake District. The fact that the ‘foreign’ could exist in the reader’s own neighbourhood made it all the more frightening. In Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, when the setting shifts from Bath to Northanger Abbey the description of the eponymous building is soon at odds with Catherine’s expectations. Here, instead of the physical setting, the landscape of the mind becomes the ultimate other world where the self is lost in a welter of barely suppressed urges and desires. Often the viewer/reader is reading an externalised representation of his/her fascination with the unknowable and writers such as Mary Shelley and Jane Austen arguably anticipated the works of Freud in their exploration of the unconscious.

### The Female Victim

At the heart of many Gothic texts is the tension provided by the possible violation of innocence – the concept of ‘virtue in distress’. In the first flowering of the Gothic as a genre the innocent victim was almost exclusively female. Her chastity was the object of the villain’s desire – the novel’s

landscapes and imagery often provided an obvious objective correlative for this sexual threat. Swords were raised, arrows let loose, doors forced and defences breached. Victims found themselves pursued down tortuous passages with no clear sight of an escape route: they were trapped in impossible situations and, as the genre developed, these were often of their own making. Sometimes their situation was made worse by the fact that their violation seemed to be legitimised by the laws of the land – the idea of the *droit du seigneur* Angela Carter memorably pastiches the latter in *The Bloody Chamber*.

In Gothic texts the preponderance of suffering women frequently foregrounds a struggle between the genders, a struggle in which men always have the upper hand. Texts such as *Jane Eyre*, of course, partially reverse this idea, since Jane, in a sense, ‘wins’; but what she wins is an aged and blinded version of the man she loves. Certainly a great deal of Gothic fiction has been written by women, from Radcliffe through to Rice; and, much Gothic fiction seems to form itself around what psychologists might call ‘eve-of-wedding fantasies’ – those fantasies of lost freedom which women in particular have – or have had – before marriage (though ironically at the height of the Gothic, women had little freedom to lose!). There is a whole strand of criticism devoted to the ‘female Gothic’ – one of its main arguments hinges on the motif of the castle and its relation to the constrained domestic sphere which most women, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, were forced to inhabit.

In *Frankenstein*, putting aside how human ambition might overstep the boundaries of creation, we also have a gender argument, since the protagonist also usurps the role of women in reproduction. It is also worth considering the novel from a biographical or even psychoanalytical perspective, informed by the fact that Mary Shelley’s own mother died after giving birth to Mary. Indeed, some critics have seen the Creature’s yearning for Victor as emblematic of Mary’s own desire for her dead mother.

However, most if not all critics agree that the female character in *Frankenstein*, with the possible exception of

Safie, typify the passive victim found in many early Gothic texts, unable to save themselves either from the feelings that they have or the situation they find themselves in.

### Motifs

Temptation and transgression are the central motifs of the Gothic. The idea of forbidden fruit, the locked casket, room or house is the clichéd catalyst that still drives the majority of Gothic narratives. Either the protagonist actively oversteps the mark or he/she invites the danger into their own, previously safe environment; and it is curiosity that allows the reader to identify with the protagonist. At the heart of these stories of temptation there is a moral paradox. Surely, it can be argued, the pursuit of knowledge is a positive aspect of human endeavour – it is a fundamental aspect of the human condition and humanity refuses to be denied the answers to any question it might ask no matter how terrible the answer might be. Pushing the limits of knowledge and the consequences of such a search has become part and parcel of the scientific age and this has easily been assimilated into the Gothic model.

The forbidden knowledge or Faust motif takes its name from the German legend of Dr Faustus, who sold his soul to the devil to obtain power and knowledge forbidden to ordinary humans. Forbidden knowledge and power is often the Gothic protagonist's goal. The Gothic 'hero' questions the universe's ambiguous nature and tries to comprehend and control those supernatural powers that mortals cannot understand. He tries to overcome human limitations and make himself into a 'god'. This ambition usually leads to the hero's 'fall' or destruction; however, Gothic tales of ambition sometimes paradoxically evoke our admiration because they picture individuals with the courage to defy fate and cosmic forces in an attempt to transcend the mundane in order to achieve the eternal or sublime. It is also interesting to note that while men strive for knowledge and understanding, women are frequently portrayed as being merely curious.

The persecuted and frequently pursued maiden is another major motif as, of course, is the ghost. Ghosts have never been absent from literature – think, for example, of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Richard III* – but in the Gothic we are constantly in the presence of ghosts, or at least of phenomena which might be considered ghostly, even if, as in the case of Radcliffe, they are usually explained away in the final few pages.

Other motifs include the Gothic castle, as in Dracula's castle and in works by Walpole, Radcliffe and Carter. The castle is a sinister, forbidding, a place where maidens find themselves persecuted by feudal barons, a reference to a medieval past which somehow remains as the site of our worst fears and terrors.

Then, of course, there is the vampire, who makes his first significant appearance in John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819) but becomes a source of obsession in much nineteenth-century literature. A particularly interesting example is the lesbian vampire in Sheridan Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* (1871), although it is Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) who has most indelibly fixed himself in the minds of English readers.

Alongside these there are all manner of monsters (Mary Shelley's Creature is the most obvious), as well as the walking dead, which continue to surface in contemporary novels such as *Night of the Damned* (2015). A further, long-lived motif is the double, or doppelgänger, which is explored in *Frankenstein*, though *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) is the most obvious example.

### Reading the Gothic

In France, the infamous Marquis de Sade wrote the first major criticism of the Gothic, attributing its growth to the dangers and terrors of the French Revolution (which some critics see the Creature in *Frankenstein* as symbolizing). Some argue that the Gothic is a response to anxieties that the ancient feudal, aristocratic order might return to unsettle bourgeois conventions, a set of conventions which, on the surface,

seemed certain of dominance during the eighteenth century but which were, perhaps, not quite as secure as they seemed. Aristocrats are frequently vilified, yet there is also the fear of the mob.

In Gothic novels the normal world is rendered void and the reader becomes complicit in whatever he or she might encounter. The vicarious thrill lies in shared act of transgression – the reader is tasting forbidden fruit, opening dangerous boxes in the hope of enjoying the illicit pleasures made available to the protagonist. The narrative often involves journeys into the unknown and this is a metaphorical enactment of the act of ‘reading’ text itself. The texts themselves are often forbidden; beyond the bounds of acceptable literature and the very act of reading them is, in itself, a flouting of the authority of the legitimate canon of ‘worthy texts’. Perhaps it is the darkness within us, the desire for bloodshed or the taboo, which craves what these damned and damning texts contain.

### Key Quotations

In what is referred to as a ‘closed book’ exam you will be required to learn quotations in order to illustrate your point or opinion. A quotation can be a single word, a short phrase or a line or two. Examiners will not expect you to quote several lines and to do so, at least without a close critical analysis of each line, is likely to be counterproductive. Below are lines taken from the novel which give you the opportunity to focus on key ideas within the text.

To awaken thrilling horror (Mary Shelley)

Divine wanderer (Walton describing Victor)

My more than sister (Victor)

A new species would bless me as its creator and source (Victor)

No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs (Victor)

I pursued nature to her hiding place (Victor)

It was on a dreary night in November (Victor)

Men appear to me as monsters (Elizabeth)

William and Justine ... the first hapless victims of my unhallowed arts (Victor)

I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel (Creature)

Misery made me a fiend (Creature)

I am malicious because I am miserable (Creature)

I am a blasted tree (Victor)

Make me happy again and I shall again be virtuous (Creature)

I will be with you on your wedding night (Creature)

Destiny was too potent, and her immutable laws had decreed my utter and terrible destruction (Victor)

...avoid ambition... yet another may succeed (Victor to Walton)

### Key Passages

When reading the following passages you should consider how you would describe the narrative voice. Does it shift within the extract? Whose point of view is being given? Which character is the focaliser, if any? What words or

## KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

### The development of new ideas

The **Enlightenment or the age of Reason** is a European intellectual movement of the late 17th and 18th centuries emphasising reason and individualism rather than tradition. The movement advanced ideals such as individual liberty, progress, religious tolerance, fraternity, constitutional government, separation of church and state and opposed an absolute monarchy and the Roman Catholic Church, and as such these Enlightenment ideas undermined the authority of the monarchy and the church and paved the way for the political revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Enlightenment was closely associated with scientific revolution, which valued empiricism, rational thought, and ideals of advancement and progress. The dominant ideological assumptions in the context of production of *Frankenstein* were the Enlightenment values of reason and progress, and represented in the novel by Victor Frankenstein. In this ideological set of assumptions, it is the proper role of humanity to master and control the natural world.

**Romantic period:** The Romantics challenged the Enlightenment (aka neo-Classicism, 18<sup>th</sup> century rationalism) celebrating not pure intellect but the importance of the feelings and imagination, and the natural world for its own sake, not as a commodity. Romanticism reacted against science, and rejected urban life. The Romantics looked to the countryside for inspiration, to find profound experiences in nature which Romantics considered man's true setting. To be alone in wild, lonely places was for the Romantics to be near to heaven. As well as reacting to the artificial, the Romantic movement was also in opposition to established institutions such as the monarchy and the Church. Other interests included: other cultures, different either in time or distance; the old and the primitive, things Medieval or Gothic, Oriental, alien, the supernatural; indulgences of the senses; and the impulse of *carpe diem*. *Frankenstein* does offer a critique of the extreme view of the Romantics that human creativity was of paramount importance. Against this the novel invites the reader to consider the value of the ideology of the family and concern for the marginalised Other.

### Historical developments and events

**The Empire:** In 1689 a “glorious revolution” occurred when England created a Bill of Rights that recognised the authority of Parliament as representative of the will of the people, and that British monarchs no longer ruled by divine right. Britain successfully maintained its presence in India, Canada and in Australian and the Polynesian Islands, although its loss of the American colonies, when American Patriot leaders set up their own government in 1774 followed by the **American Revolution** which ended in 1781, was damaging to its national pride. Queen Victoria’s ruled from 1837 to 1901.

Parliamentary bills reflect an era of acceptance and of support in Victorian Great Britain: Roman Catholics were given the right to sit in Parliament and hold other Government posts; and removed the barrier that excluded Christians from public offices and degrees at Oxford and Cambridge; the Reform Bill of 1832 standardised voting rights for men with a certain amount of property across the country; the Poor Law Act set up workhouses; slavery was abolished in 1833, and in the same year factory inspectors were first appointed. Trade unions began to form. One of the most radical movements was the Chartist, who demanded voting conditions such as a secret ballot, equal electoral districts, abolition of property qualifications for MPs, payment for MPs, and the vote for all adult males. Despite petitions, the movement failed.

**French Revolution:** Ideas about who should govern shifted during the Romantic period from an authoritarian monarchy, with the belief of the Divine Right of Kings, to a desire for equality and a democratic involvement of the people. Despite calls for reform in France, the aristocracy were unable to curb their need for power which resulted in the storming of the Bastille – a symbol of royal power and oppression – in July 1789. A “Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen” greatly reduced the power of the king and the aristocracy. In 1792, the nobility was abolished, the king was imprisoned and the right to vote was extended to all adult males. France was declared Republic under the slogan “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”.

**The Industrial Revolution:** Advances in science and developments in machinery during the 18<sup>th</sup> century foreshadowed the Industrial Revolution, which rapidly gathered pace during the Romantic period. The building of canals, bridges and roads help increase the speed with which raw materials and finished goods were transported. Automation led to massive urbanisation and much higher levels of productivity, profit and prosperity. In 1811 the Luddites campaigned against the takeover of jobs by machines by destroying equipment in protest. Despite the Luddite protests and the Pentridge Uprising in 1817, the industrial revolution actually created an unprecedented demand for labour of all people, most notably women and children.

**Feminism and patriarchal power:** Whilst Mary Wollstonecraft’s tome argued for gender equality in 1792, Victorian women were unable to vote or own property, and were firmly grounded in the domestic sphere, as a wife’s proper role was to love, honour and obey her husband, as her marriage vows stated. Author Isabella Beeton described women as “Household Generals” whose role was to “run a respectable household and secure the happiness, comfort and well-being of her family;”; this ideal often referred to women as “the angel of the house”. Women, if in the workforce, were required to hand over wages to her husband. The concept of *pater familias* with the husband as head of the household, moral leader of the family was entrenched in British culture. Divorce was difficult to obtain. Early feminist author Virginia Woolf (b. 1882) said to an audience of women that her job as a writer was “Kill the angel of the house”! Shelley also critiques these ideals and represents women in their limited roles as voiceless as victims of male egotism.

**Religion:** The 19th century was also the first time in England that a substantial number of public figures openly declared that they had no religious beliefs. Study of the scriptures as historical texts, and later scientific advances such as Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution made it more difficult for many educated people to accept the literal truth of the Bible. Whilst half the population attended church, there was a move away from the Anglican Church towards others services such as the Catholics, Methodists, Baptists and Quakers.

**Art and literature:** In all art forms was a renewal of interest in the medieval period, when faith in an unchanging God was apparently simpler and social values, beliefs and position fixed and unchanging. Arthurian legends were the subject of a number of poems and Pre-Raphaelite paintings and Gothic architecture. The railway – a potent symbol of Victorian progress and industrialisation – became a focus of novels and poetry – as the ‘iron horse’ altered the idea of distance and time, and changed the face and mobility of many communities.

Cruttenden, Aidan, *The Victorians*, (2003) Evans Brother Limited, Turin, Italy.

King, Neal, *The Romantics*, (2003), Evans Brother Limited, Turin, Italy.

McGuire, Ann, *Frankenstein: Representation and Reception*, School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts, 2016 ELT Conference.

# FRANKENSTEIN

Notes

## Letters 1-4: Robert Walton's letters to his sister, Margaret

- Background: inconsistent education, inherited his fortune from his cousin; worked hard to learn naval skills
- Was inspired by his study of poetry; but failed as a poet
- North Pole is the promise of discovery in magnetism and astrology and paradise (Eden).
- Dramatic introduction of Victor Frankenstein
- Teasing mention of monster
- Robert Walton/Victor Frankenstein – mirror personalities
- Letters/epistles (epistolary) establish authenticity, truth, and the notion of telling stories with readers listening.
- Introduces the voice of Victor Frankenstein, who decides to tell his story as a warning to Walton, who he senses shares the destructive desire to transgress the allowed limits of knowledge.

What	Themes, ideas, meanings
"Inspired by this wind of promise, my daydreams become more fervent and vivid."	Idea of male conquering and dominating nature Depth of feeling – Romanticism Beginning and development of an obsession.
Dismissive of his sister's concerns about his excursion "an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings."	Ironic tone shows the separation of men and women's worlds. We never hear Margaret's voice, as her letters are not included.
His dream creates an elevated feeling	Depth of feeling - Romanticism
The sailors and lieutenant are Like Walton, undaunted, "possessed of courage, animated by the spirit of adventure"	The men are as one, with the same interest in exploration and are happy separated from the home and family. They are far from a normal life and family. Lost real connection with the world. Lack of connection with women.
Terms included: <b>Sympathy:</b> a romantic mark of virtue if someone is capable of identifying with other people and their emotions. A model of moral excellence. <b>Enthusiasm:</b> frenzy, literally means to be inspired by a divine force.	Romantic ideas of behaviour Sympathetic sensibility is shown as benevolence and kindness.
Allusions to "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" "the land of mist and snow"; He will not kill the albatross	He will not disturb the status quo, the order and beauty of the universe.

<p>"There is love in the marvellous, a belief in the marvellous...which hurries me... the wild seas and unvisited regions."</p>	<p>Romantic notion of the power of the sublime in nature</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Even broken in spirit as he is, no one can feel more deeply than he does the beauties of nature, the starry sky, and every sight afforded by these wonderful regions seem still to have the power of elevating his soul from earth."</li> <li>• Walton sees the power of his mind and his ability to see the cause of things.</li> <li>• Maritime metaphor: "Strange and harrowing must be his story; frightful the storm which embraced the gallant vessel on its course, and wrecked it – thus!"</li> </ul>	<p>Powerful connection between Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein.</p>
<p>Names of towns - St Petersburg and Archangel in Russia.</p>	<p>may have allegorical links to St Peter and the archangel Michael.</p>

## Questions - Chapters 1 -4

Find evidence/quotes from text and answer the following questions.

1. How are the female characters – Caroline and Elizabeth - represented as the Victorian ideal?
2. How does Victor elevate his work/studies over Elizabeth's and Clerval's?
3. What is Victor's reaction to his two professors? What shaped Victor's reaction?
4. What in M. Waldman's lecture about science in Chapter 3 is worrying?