***Letter1***

***Summary:***

* Captain [**Robert Walton**](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/frankenstein/robert-walton) of England is on an expedition to the [**North Pole**](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/frankenstein/themes/exploration). He writes a series of letters to his sister, Margaret, to pass the time and, you know, keep in touch.
* Walton has some goals: see new places, "tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man" (Letter 1.1), boldly go where no man has gone before, that sort of thing.

***Synopsis:***This first letter, written on December 11, 17 — , is from Robert Walton in St. Petersburg, Russia to his sister Mrs. Saville in England. Walton is on an expedition to look for a passage through the Arctic Ocean to the North Pacific Ocean via the seas of the North Pole. Knowing the harsh climate and the dangers involved with making such a passage, he feels confident that a crew and ship will be found to make the trip, even after six long years of his own preparations. Walton recounts how he will not sail until June of the next year on his expedition, when the polar ices have thawed somewhat. Soon, he will travel to Archangel (now Ankhangelsk), Russia to finalize his plans and hire a ship. He tells his sister that if he succeeds he will not return in months or years. If he fails, he will be home sooner or never.

It was Walton's father who had told his uncle that Robert should not become a career seaman. Robert does so anyway after failing as a poet and inheriting a substantial sum of money from a deceased cousin. He relays to his sister that he has felt a sense of sadness at his own ignorance, and he wants to improve himself and expand his knowledge.

This letter and the following three, which begin the novel, use a literary device called framing, which, like a picture frame, sets up the major premise of the novel. [Mary Shelley](https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/f/frankenstein/mary-shelley-biography) returns the reader to the letter format at the end of the novel. This technique eases the reader into the story and adds a subplot that gives the main story texture and richness. The framing technique also makes the story more compelling because Walton will eventually see the [monster](https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/f/frankenstein/character-analysis/the-monster) at the end of the novel. The story about the creature would be merely hearsay if not for Walton's personal encounter with Frankenstein and his creation. Shelley uses Walton to add validity to the novel. Also, note that the letters to Margaret Saville in England have the initials "M.S.," which could also be interpreted as Shelley's own initials.

Many [Romantic](https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/f/frankenstein/critical-essays/the-romantic-movement) writers at this time had little formal education. To make up for this lack of education, they undertook adventures to broaden the mind and soul. Shelley and her contemporaries are no different. A popular destination was the European continent. These adventures would provide a source for growth and material for writing, as seen throughout Shelley's Frankenstein.

Walton, himself, is a fairly typical Romantic character because he is educating himself and traveling for his own educational pursuits. Feeling sadness at his own ignorance and desiring to improve himself, he laments in his letter that "my education was neglected, yet I was passionately fond of reading. These volumes [of Uncle Thomas' journeys] were my study day and night" as a young man. To add to his practical education, prior to this point, he worked as a second mate on a Greenland whaling ship, where he became a fine and able seaman.

Explorers had tried and failed to make the journey from Russia to the Pacific Ocean via the Arctic Ocean. Adolf Nordenskjold later completed this expedition through the Northwest Arctic Passage in 1878-79. This expedition will pass close to the North Pole, a far flung region not yet fully explored or understood during the 1800s. The remote place settings, the Arctic Circle and St. Petersburg, are another example of an element in the Romantic novel.

***Analysis:***The novel itself begins with a series of letters from the explorer [Robert Walton](https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/frankenstein/character/robert-walton/) to his sister, Margaret Saville. Walton, a well-to-do Englishman with a passion for seafaring, is the captain of a ship headed on a dangerous voyage to the North Pole. In the first letter, he tells his sister of the preparations leading up to his departure and of the desire burning in him to accomplish “some great purpose”—discovering a northern passage to the Pacific, revealing the source of the Earth’s magnetism, or simply setting foot on undiscovered territory.

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part  
Summary Part 1:****Frankenstein* begins with a series of four letters from [**Robert Walton**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/frankenstein/characters/robert-walton) to his sister, [**Margaret Saville**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/frankenstein/characters). The first letter is written on December 11 from St. Petersburg, Russia, sometime in the eighteenth century. Walton is about to set out on a journey at sea to reach the North Pole, which he considers a region of warmth, "eternal [**light**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/frankenstein/symbols/light)," and unparalleled beauty.

***Analysis Part 1:***Walton's description of the North Pole reads like a Romantic poem full of beautiful images of nature, and establishes that nature and its beauty will play a major role in the novel.

***Summary Part 2:***

[**Walton's**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/frankenstein/characters/robert-walton) purpose in venturing to the North Pole is twofold: to discover a northern passage to the countries on the other side of the world; and to determine the origin of the North Pole's magnetism. Walton says he once hoped to become a famous poet, but failed. Yet he has kept his childhood dream of reaching the North Pole. He adds that he could have lived his life in wealth and ease, but did not. For this reason, he feels that he deserves to "accomplish some great purpose."

***Analysis Part 2:***

Ambition motivates Walton, but it is an ambition that stems from an arrogant sense of entitlement. He feels that he deserves to make his mark on history. Yet Walton's ambition also emerges from a childhood dream. This combination of ambition and innocence is also, as it will be made clear, what motivated Frankenstein.

***Summary Part 3:***

Walton plans to rent a ship, hire a crew, and depart from northern Russia in June, unsure of when or if he will ever return.

***Analysis Part 3:***

Walton is willing to give up his life to achieve his ambitions.

***Quotations:***

What may not be expected in a country of eternal light?

This quote comes from Walton’s first letter to his sister in England. It encapsulates one of the main themes of *Frankenstein*—that of light as a symbol of knowledge and discovery. Walton’s quest to reach the northernmost part of the earth is similar in spirit to Victor’s quest for the secret of life: both seek ultimate knowledge, and both sacrifice the comfort of the realm of known knowledge in their respective pursuits. Additionally, the beauty and simplicity of the phrasing epitomize the eighteenth-century scientific rationalists’ optimism about, and trust in, knowledge as a pure good.