***Preface  
Summary:***Okay, time for a quick Brain Snack, to get your appetite working. Mary Shelley first published [**Frankenstein**](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/frankenstein) in 1818. When she republished it in 1831, she revised it (a lot) and wrote this nifty preface. The 1818 and 1831 editions have some pretty significant differences—not so much in plot, but in style, characterization, and the role of fate. Most scholars prefer the 1818 version, but most mass market publishers still use the 1831 version. We're sticking with the 1831 version because it's more widely available, but you can see some of the differences [**here**](https://sites.google.com/site/frankensteinmachado/comparingversions).

* In this preface, Shelley explains that it was rainy and kind of creepy the summer of 1816, when Shelley (then Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin) and her future husband were vacationing in the Swiss Alps along with some other friends, like majorly famous poet [**Lord Byron**](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/biography/lord-byron).
* Today, we know that [**Mount Tambora**](https://history1800s.about.com/od/crimesanddisasters/a/The-Year-Without-A-Summer.htm) erupted in the Indian Ocean in 1815 and disrupted weather patterns all over the world.
* In 1816, all the Shelleys knew was that this was shaping up to be the worst summer ever, so they told German ghost stories to pass the time.
* And then someone had the brilliant idea to have a ghost-story contest. The result? One of the first vampire stories in Western literature… and Frankenstein.
* Oh, there's also some name-dropping of Dr. Darwin. Not the famous one, but his grandpa, who was a less noteworthy science geek.

***Synopsis:***Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote the Preface to [Mary Shelley](https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/f/frankenstein/mary-shelley-biography)'s Frankenstein in September 1817. It immediately alludes to a "Dr. (Erasmus) Darwin," which gives some medical and scientific credence to the novel that it might not have had. Percy Shelley also mentions the German philosophical writers who, at the time, were experimenting with novels that touched on the [Gothic](https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/f/frankenstein/critical-essays/frankenstein-as-a-gothic-novel) genre, the science fiction genre, and the medical genre. Percy Shelley attempts to put Frankenstein in the context of other novels. He does not want the novel to be just a "mere tale of spectres." Wishing for us to suspend our disbelief that the dead can be brought back to life, he sees this as a novel that is more universal in nature and that gives insight into the human condition.

Shelley aims to seek the "truth of the elementary principles of human nature" and supply some innovative ideas regarding those simple human truths. The allusion is to the age of [Romanticism](https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/f/frankenstein/critical-essays/the-romantic-movement) and the Gothic novel. Romantic novels concern themselves with passion, not reason, and imagination and intuition, rather than the logical. Gothic novels frequently deal with the supernatural and remote, far away settings. Frankenstein will not be different and will adhere to the simple rules of Gothic novels. Shelley invokes the great works of Greek and English literature to act as guides and as a guideline for this work. He cites Homer's The Iliad, Shakespeare's Tempest and Midsummer Night's Dream, and Milton's Paradise Lost as works that are worthy of imitation and serve as exemplary models. He hopes that Frankenstein contributes to the body of English and world literature, perhaps equaling those previously mentioned works.

Shelley tells briefly how the novel came into being. During the wet and cool summer of 1816, in Geneva, Switzerland, several friends gathered to create and tell ghost stories. Percy Shelley mentions himself, Lord Byron, and Mary. He omits mention of Byron's mistress, Claire (Jane) Clairmont and of another guest, John William Polidori. Polidori later published his own Gothic novel, The Vampyre; a Tale (1819). This summer meeting produced two of the most important characters of English literature: the Frankenstein [monster](https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/f/frankenstein/character-analysis/the-monster) and the Vampire.  
***Analysis:***Frankenstein opens with a preface, signed by Mary Shelley but commonly supposed to have been written by her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley. It states that the novel was begun during a summer vacation in the Swiss Alps, when unseasonably rainy weather and nights spent reading German ghost stories inspired the author and her literary companions to engage in a ghost story writing contest, of which this work is the only completed product.

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part  
Summary Part 1:***The Preface explains the origin of the novel. Shelley spent the summer of 1816 near Geneva, Switzerland, where much of the novel takes place. One rainy night, Shelley and her friends challenged each other to write ghost stories. *Frankenstein* was the only one of the stories to be completed. The Preface also reveals Shelley's aim in writing the novel: to present a flattering depiction of "domestic affection" and "universal virtue."

***Analysis Part 1:***The origin of the novel as a ghost story places it squarely within the Gothic genre. The statement that the novel is meant to provide a positive image of "domestic affection" indicates that family will be a major theme.