OLYMPIADS SCHOOL/GRADE 9 ENGLISH/HANDOUT 11

NAME:_____

Announcement: Please purchase or borrow a copy of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, because we will be reading and analyzing it soon.

Now that we have (more or less) read the entire novel, we can return to the text for a deeper understanding of its significant themes. Read the following three questions to prepare for today's, and possibly also next week's, in-class writing activities.

1. The horror story is just as popular today as it was in Shelley's early nineteenth century England. What is the appeal of this genre? Discuss elements from Frankenstein that parallel characteristics of modern horror tales such as Stephen King's, or contemporary films such as *Nightmare on Elm Street*. What are the effects of these elements on the audience, and how might that explain our fascination?

2. Place Frankenstein's creature in modern times. Suppose he had a family that raises him, includes him, and even enrolls him in school. How might today's society treat Victor's creature differently? How would it mimic the time period of the novel?

3. The patriarchal society of Frankenstein is one in which men pursue their goals against hopeless odds. In light of this work ethic, is Robert Walton a failure when he turns his ship around at the end of the novel? How would Victor Frankenstein answer this question? What would Mary Shelley say? What do you think?

Activity 1: Concept Map/Brainstorming Showdown
Your instructor will divide you into smaller groups. You will have about fifteen minutes to produce a concept map (either on a large piece of paper or on the chalkboard) in response to one of the three questions above (your choice).

Either your teacher will decide which one is the best concept map, or everyone will vote for the best one. Needless to say, you shouldn't vote for your group's work.

Reflection
What are the strengths of the best concept map? Write down your thoughts about it.

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Activity 2: Thesis Statement Showdown

Your groups will be asked to produce a thesis statement for each of the questions on page 1, one at a time. A volunteer for each group will write the thesis statement on the board for everyone to read it.

Again, either your teacher will decide which one is the best thesis statement for each question, or everyone will vote for the best one. Regardless of who wins, we will workshop all the statements as a class.

Using the lines below, (1) copy down the original thesis statements generated by your group and peers, (2) copy down the improved version after the workshop, and (3) reflect on the changes made. How did the thesis statements improve?

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Activity 3: Introduction Showdown

Your groups will be asked to collaboratively write an introduction for one of the three assigned questions on page 1. Either use the lines below to write the introduction for an oral presentation, or write it on a large piece of paper for a gallery walk, or write it on the chalkboard.

Again, either your teacher will decide which one is the best introduction, or everyone will vote for the best one.

LITERARY STUDY

Read an excerpt from a New Yorker article about Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley began writing "Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus" when she was eighteen years old, two years after she'd become pregnant with her first child, a baby she did not name. "Nurse the baby, read," she had written in her diary, day after day, until the eleventh day: "I awoke in the night to give it suck it appeared to be sleeping so quietly that I would not awake it," and then, in the morning, "Find my baby dead." With grief at that loss came a fear of "a fever from the milk." Her breasts were swollen, inflamed, unsucked; her sleep, too, grew fevered. "Dream that my little baby came to life again; that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived," she wrote in her diary. "Awake and find no baby."

Pregnant again only weeks later, she was likely still nursing her second baby when she started writing "Frankenstein," and pregnant with her third by the time she finished. She didn't put her name on her book—she published "Frankenstein" anonymously, in 1818, not least out of a concern that she might lose custody of her children—and she didn't give her monster a name, either. "This anonymous androdaemon," one reviewer called it. For the first theatrical production of "Frankenstein," staged in London in 1823 (by which time the author had given birth to four children, buried three, and lost another unnamed baby to a miscarriage so severe that she nearly died of bleeding that stopped only when her husband had her sit on ice), the monster was listed on the playbill as "———."

"This nameless mode of naming the unnameable is rather good," Shelley remarked about the creature's theatrical billing. She herself had no name of her own. Like the creature pieced together from cadavers collected by Victor Frankenstein, her name was an assemblage of parts: the name of her mother, the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, stitched to that of her father, the philosopher William Godwin, grafted onto that of her husband, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, as if Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley were the sum of her relations, bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh, if not the milk of her mother's milk, since her mother had died eleven days after giving birth to her, mainly too sick to give suck—Awoke and found no mother.

"It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils," Victor Frankenstein, a university student, says, pouring out his tale. The rain patters on the windowpane; a bleak light flickers from a dying candle. He looks at the "lifeless thing" at his feet, come to life: "I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs." Having labored so long to bring the creature to life, he finds himself disgusted and horrified—"unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created"—and flees, abandoning his creation, unnamed. "I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion," the creature says, before, in the book's final scene, he disappears on a raft of ice.

"Frankenstein" is four stories in one: an allegory, a fable, an epistolary novel, and an autobiography, a chaos of literary fertility that left its very young author at pains to explain her "hideous progeny." In the introduction she wrote for a revised edition in 1831, she took up the humiliating question "How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea" and made up a story in which she virtually erased herself as an author, insisting that the story had come to her in a dream ("I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision,—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together") and that writing it consisted of "making only a transcript" of that dream. A century later, when a lurching, grunting Boris Karloff played the creature in Universal Pictures's brilliant 1931 production of "Frankenstein," directed by James Whale, the monster—prodigiously eloquent, learned, and persuasive in the novel—was no longer merely nameless but all but speechless, too, as if what Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley had to say was too radical to be heard, an agony unutterable.

Every book is a baby, born, but "Frankenstein" is often supposed to have been more assembled than written, an unnatural birth, as though all that the author had done were to piece together the writings of

others, especially those of her father and her husband. “If Godwin’s daughter could not help philosophising,” one mid-twentieth-century critic wrote, “Shelley’s wife knew also the eerie charms of the morbid, the occult, the scientifically bizarre.” This enduring condescension, the idea of the author as a vessel for the ideas of other people—a fiction in which the author participated, so as to avoid the scandal of her own brain—goes some way to explaining why “Frankenstein” has accreted so many wildly different and irreconcilable readings and restagings in the two centuries since its publication. For its bicentennial, the original, 1818 edition has been reissued, as a trim little paperback (Penguin Classics), with an introduction by the distinguished biographer Charlotte Gordon, and as a beautifully illustrated hardcover keepsake, “The New Annotated Frankenstein” (Liveright), edited and annotated by Leslie S. Klinger. Universal is developing a new “Bride of Frankenstein” as part of a series of remakes from its backlist of horror movies. Filmography recapitulating politico-chicanery, the age of the superhero is about to yield to the age of the monster. But what about the baby?

According to the writer, Frankenstein “is four stories in one: an allegory, a fable, an epistolary novel, and an autobiography, a chaos of literary fertility that left its very young author at pains to explain her ‘hideous progeny.’” Discuss.