

Frankenstein Study Guide

About the Author

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley grew up in a family that valued critical thinking and writing. She was the daughter of a philosopher, William Godwin, and a writer, Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote "Vindication of the Rights of Woman" in 1792. Though Shelley's mother died in childbirth, and she was raised by her father, she knew of her mother's writings and was influenced by them. When she was 18, Shelley ran away with Percy Bysshe Shelley, a prominent British Romantic poet. They married in 1816. The couple had a son, but soon after his birth, her husband died in a shipwreck. After his death, Mary Shelley struggled with finances and lost almost everything the family had. She relied on writing fiction to support herself. Frankenstein (1818) was her first and her most successful work of fiction.

Genre: American Gothic Fiction

American Gothic Fiction follows some of the basic themes and uses similar techniques as European Gothic Fiction, yet it also remains quite distinctive. Why? Because of Edgar Allan Poe. Poe is best known for his poetry and short stories that add a touch of the macabre and mystery, thus giving Poe credit for defining the genre. The tragic events of his own life gave him insights that helped him understand and then write about the worst imaginable evils. His own curiosity with psychological distress, the supernatural, and mental illness added a degree of horror that is unequalled in other fiction.

Historical Context of Frankenstein

In the 18th century, British and European art and politics stressed the power of the human mind above all else. This period was known as the Age of Reason. Citizens felt empowered by their belief that humanity was good and that their reason was able to lead them to discover new possibilities for civilized life. With their new found sense of power, people set out to reshape all of society. The American and French Revolutions erupted to bring about political and social reforms, and the Industrial Revolution changed the work opportunities, forcing people into long days in factories that brought about new physical hardships for laborers. Most literature critics claim that the Gothic genre was a reaction to these new forces in society. The Gothic writers brought to life the dark side that came with this new age of human thought and progress. At a time when writers and thinkers had believed in the infinite possibilities of humanity, Gothic novelists showed the imperfections of humans and the powerful forces that brought distress to people around the globe. Nature and death showed their strengths in Gothic literature.

Literary influences seen in Frankenstein:

- Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*
- John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Themes

Family vs. Individual

Society vs. Human Isolation

Tragedy and despair are heightened when someone experiences a lack of connection to either family or society as a whole. For example, Shelley shows readers the depth of despair that comes not from Victor or the monster, but rather from isolation. When Victor becomes lost in his research, he removes himself from society and becomes isolated from all of his support systems. He then loses sight of his responsibilities and the consequences of his actions. The monster then turns to a destructive path because its isolation fills it with overpowering anger. What becomes the monster's one final goal? To make Victor as isolated as it is. Shelley shows us that the worst imaginable fate is to live alone, separated from all friends and family and from society and a whole.

Unchecked Personal Ambition

Through Victor and Walton, *Frankenstein* examines the personal ambitions of human beings, revealing the creative powers and the flawed possibilities. Both Victor and Walton dream of both changing society and bringing glory to themselves through their personal achievements. Yet their ambitions also reveal their professional weaknesses and human shortcomings. Blinded by their desire for glory, they don't consider the consequences of their actions as they are immersed in their work. So, while Victor turns himself into a god of sorts who brings life to a new creation, he fails to be able to handle the responsibility for managing the creation and giving it a purpose in life that brings about good. Victor thinks he will be a world-renowned hero, but he ends up being the creator of a force to be feared. Though Walton turns back from his journey to the North Pole before getting himself and his crew killed, he does so with regret and after reaching the conclusion that he has been robbed of his chance for glory rather than honestly examining his choices. Neither Victor nor Walton overcome their blinding ambitions.

Innocence Lost/Innocence Taken

Some people move from childhood through their teens and into adulthood through natural growing experiences that bring maturity and new insights and abilities. Other people are tossed into adulthood through tragic circumstances or leap ahead led by an inflated sense of their own worth and abilities. *Frankenstein* presents many examples of the youthful innocence lost early. The most obvious case involves Victor. As a young man on the edge of adulthood, Victor leaves home to pursue his studies with a youthful sense of hope and with dreams of what's ahead. He wants to explore previously unknown powers and shed light on all of the mysteries of creation,

but his success brings an unhealthy arrogance that moves him into adulthood and into a stage of life in which his pride brings an end to his youthfulness.

His work also leads to the deaths of William, Justine, Elizabeth, and Clerval, four characters whom the author portrays as innocent and kind. Through these murders, Shelley suggests that innocence (and even life) can be easily taken away or destroyed by the human desire to bring changes without considering the consequences.

Nature vs. Humankind

Romantic writers portrayed nature as superior to human forces in the world. Mary Shelley's imagery and language convey the profound power and faultlessness of the natural world. Human beings bring worries, imperfect logic and countless flaws into their lives such as pride and prejudice. Human life can't compare to nature's perfection. Shelley shows us what happens when, in *Frankenstein*, imperfect people try to manipulate nature's perfection. The power of nature prevails.

Revenge

The monster begins its life with a trusting, loving heart. However, after it is abandoned and mistreated by humans, the monster turns to revenge as its main goal in life. Revenge consumes both the monster and Victor. They both lose touch with any goodness they previously had and become obsessed with destroying their foe.

Prejudice

In *Frankenstein*, Shelley sheds light on humankind's prejudice—a weakness that has existed throughout history. The characters in the novel judge the monster and assume he must be dangerous based on its outward appearance. The monster, however, was helpful and kind originally, and it had the potential for good. People rejected the creation multiple times, however, and demanded that it be removed their villages and families despite potential goodness. Only the blind character accepts the monster and shows readers that we are all blinded by our own prejudices.

Questions

1. Why do you think Frankenstein's creation is never given a name?
2. What themes are revealed through the setting and symbols?
3. Discuss the theme of loneliness in this novel.
4. Discuss the quest for knowledge in this novel. Where does it lead?
5. Discuss the role of revenge and forgiveness in the novel.