Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

An Introduction
Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus

- *Frankenstein* is a novel written by Mary Shelley.
- Shelley started writing the story when she was 18 and the novel was published when she was 20. The first edition was published anonymously in London in 1818. Shelley's name doesn’t appear until the second edition.
- The title of the novel refers to a scientist, Victor Frankenstein, who learns how to create life and creates a being in the likeness of man, but larger than average and more powerful. In popular culture, people have tended incorrectly to refer to the monster as "Frankenstein". *Frankenstein* is infused with some elements of the Gothic novel and the Romantic movement. It was also a warning against the expansion of modern man in the Industrial Revolution, alluded to in the novel's subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*. The story has had an influence across literature and popular culture and spawned a complete genre of horror stories and films.
Gothic novel and the Romantic movement

- **Gothic fiction** is a genre of literature that combines elements of horror and romance. It is generally believed to have been invented by an English author around 1764.

- **Romanticism** is a literary movement that originated in the second half of the 18th century in Europe, and gained strength in reaction to the Industrial Revolution. It was a revolt against aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment and a reaction against the scientific rationalization of nature, and was embodied most strongly in the visual arts, music, and literature, but had a major impact on education.
Industrial Revolution

- The **Industrial Revolution** was a period from the 18th to the 19th century where major changes in agriculture, manufacturing, mining, and transport had a profound effect on the socioeconomic and cultural conditions starting in the United Kingdom, then subsequently spreading throughout Europe, North America, and eventually the world.

- The onset of the Industrial Revolution marked a major turning point in human history; almost every aspect of daily life was eventually influenced in some way.
**Prometheus**

- In Greek mythology, *Prometheus* is a Titan.
- He was a champion of human-kind known for his wily intelligence, who stole fire from Zeus and gave it to mortals.
- Zeus then punished him for his crime by having him bound to a rock while a great eagle ate his liver every day only to have it grow back to be eaten again the next day.
- Prometheus is credited with – or blamed for – playing a pivotal role in the early history of humankind.
Plot Overview of the letters:

• In a series of letters, Robert Walton, the captain of a ship bound for the North Pole, recounts to his sister back in England the progress of his dangerous mission. Successful early on, the mission is soon interrupted by seas full of impassable ice. Trapped, Walton encounters Victor Frankenstein, who has been traveling by dog-drawn sledge across the ice and is weakened by the cold. Walton takes him aboard ship, helps nurse him back to health, and hears the fantastic tale of the monster that Frankenstein created.
Characters

• **Victor Frankenstein** - The doomed protagonist and narrator of the main portion of the story. Studying in Ingolstadt, Victor discovers the secret of life and creates an intelligent but grotesque monster, from whom he recoils in horror. Victor keeps his creation of the monster a secret, feeling increasingly guilty and ashamed as he realizes how helpless he is to prevent the monster from ruining his life and the lives of others.

• **The monster** - The eight-foot-tall, hideously ugly creation of Victor Frankenstein. Intelligent and sensitive, the monster attempts to integrate himself into human social patterns, but all who see him shun him. His feeling of abandonment compels him to seek revenge against his creator.
Characters

- **Robert Walton** - The Arctic seafarer whose letters open and close *Frankenstein*. Walton picks the bedraggled Victor Frankenstein up off the ice, helps nurse him back to health, and hears Victor’s story. He records the incredible tale in a series of letters addressed to his sister, Margaret Saville, in England.

- **Alphonse Frankenstein** - Victor’s father, very sympathetic toward his son. Alphonse consoles Victor in moments of pain and encourages him to remember the importance of family.

- **Elizabeth Lavenza** - An orphan, four to five years younger than Victor, whom the Frankenstein family adopt. Victor’s mother rescues Elizabeth from a destitute peasant cottage in Italy. Elizabeth embodies the novel’s motif of passive women, as she waits patiently for Victor’s attention.
Characters

- **Henry Clerval** - Victor’s boyhood friend, who nurses Victor back to health in Ingolstadt. After working unhappily for his father, Henry begins to follow in Victor’s footsteps as a scientist. His cheerfulness counters Victor’s moroseness.

- **William Frankenstein** - Victor’s youngest brother and the darling of the Frankenstein family. The monster strangles William in the woods outside Geneva in order to hurt Victor for abandoning him. William’s death deeply saddens Victor and burdens him with tremendous guilt about having created the monster.

- **Justine Moritz** - A young girl adopted into the Frankenstein household while Victor is growing up. Justine is blamed and executed for William’s murder, which is actually committed by the monster.
Characters

- **Caroline Beaufort** - The daughter of Beaufort. After her father’s death, Caroline is taken in by, and later marries, Alphonse Frankenstein. She dies of scarlet fever, which she contracts from Elizabeth, just before Victor leaves for Ingolstadt at age seventeen.

- **Beaufort** - A merchant and friend of Victor’s father; the father of Caroline Beaufort.

- **Peasants** - A family of peasants, including a blind old man, De Lacey; his son and daughter, Felix and Agatha; and a foreign woman named Safie. The monster learns how to speak and interact by observing them. When he reveals himself to them, hoping for friendship, they beat him and chase him away.

- **M. Waldman** - The professor of chemistry who sparks Victor’s interest in science. He dismisses the alchemists’ conclusions as unfounded but sympathizes with Victor’s interest in a science that can explain the “big questions,” such as the origin of life.

- **M. Krempe** - A professor of natural philosophy at Ingolstadt. He dismisses Victor’s study of the alchemists as wasted time and encourages him to begin his studies anew.

- **Mr. Kirwin** - The magistrate who accuses Victor of Henry’s murder.
Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

**Dangerous Knowledge:** The pursuit of knowledge is at the heart of *Frankenstein*, as Victor attempts to go beyond accepted human limits and find the secret of life.

- Robert Walton attempts reach the North Pole. This ruthless pursuit of knowledge proves dangerous, as Victor’s act of creation eventually results in the destruction of everyone dear to him, and Walton finds himself trapped.
- Whereas Victor’s obsessive hatred of the monster drives him to his death, Walton ultimately pulls back from his treacherous mission, having learned from Victor’s example how destructive the thirst for knowledge can be.
Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

- **Monstrosity** pervades the entire novel. Eight feet tall and hideously ugly, the monster is rejected by society.

- His monstrosity results not only from his grotesque appearance but also from the unnatural manner of his creation, which involves the secretive animation of a mix of stolen body parts and strange chemicals. He is a product not of collaborative scientific effort but of dark, supernatural workings.

- The monster is only the most literal of a number of monstrous entities in the novel. Victor himself is a kind of monster, as his ambition, secrecy, and selfishness alienate him from human society. Ordinary on the outside, he may be the true “monster” inside, as he is eventually consumed by an obsessive hatred of his creation. Finally, many critics have described the novel itself as monstrous, a stitched-together combination of different voices, texts, and tenses.
**Motifs** are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

- **Passive Women**

For a novel written by the daughter of an important feminist, *Frankenstein* is strikingly devoid of strong female characters. The novel is littered with passive women who suffer calmly and then expire: Caroline Beaufort is a self-sacrificing mother who dies taking care of her adopted daughter; Justine is executed for murder, despite her innocence; the creation of the female monster is aborted by Victor because he fears being unable to control her actions once she is animated; Elizabeth waits, impatient but helpless, for Victor to return to her, and she is eventually murdered by the monster. One can argue that Shelley renders her female characters so passive and subjects them to such ill treatment in order to call attention to the obsessive and destructive behavior that Victor and the monster exhibit.
Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Light and Fire

• “What could not be expected in the country of eternal light?” asks Walton, displaying a faith in, and optimism about, science. In Frankenstein, light symbolizes knowledge, discovery, and enlightenment. The natural world is a place of dark secrets, hidden passages, and unknown mechanisms; the goal of the scientist is then to reach light. The dangerous and more powerful cousin of light is fire. The monster’s first experience with a still-smoldering flame reveals the dual nature of fire: he discovers excitedly that it creates light in the darkness of the night, but also that it harms him when he touches it.

• The presence of fire in the text also brings to mind the full title of Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus*. The Greek god Prometheus gave the knowledge of fire to humanity and was then severely punished for it. Victor, attempting to become a modern Prometheus, is certainly punished, but unlike fire, his “gift” to humanity—knowledge of the secret of life—remains a secret.