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**SHELLEY'S**

# **FRANKENSTEIN**



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# FRANKENSTEIN

## NOTES

*including*

- *Life of the Author*
- *General Plot Summary*
- *List of Characters*
- *Critical Commentaries*
- *Mary Shelley and Romanticism*
- *The Gothic Story*
- *German Expressionism and the American Horror Film*
- *Questions for Review*
- *Selected Bibliography*
- *Frankenstein Genealogy*

*by*

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# FRANKENSTEIN NOTES

## LIFE OF THE AUTHOR

Mary Wollstonecraft (Godwin) Shelley was born in August, 1797, the daughter of two notable English thinkers. Her father, William Godwin (1756-1836), was a well-known champion of the cause of the underprivileged. His most famous book, *Political Justice* (1793), is a criticism of existing society as well as an ethical treatise. His other famous book, *Caleb Williams* (1794), has as its theme the privilege of class and the irresponsibility of the aristocracy. It is to her father that Mary Shelley dedicated *Frankenstein*. Mary Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), was a well-known champion of the feminist cause, and her most famous work is *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin met in 1796 and were married in 1797, in part to protect the legal rights of a forthcoming child—Mary. Mary Wollstonecraft died a few weeks after giving birth to her daughter.

The admiration of the famous nineteenth-century poet Percy Bysshe Shelley for Godwin's *Political Justice* caused him to seek out its author. As a result of their meeting, Godwin began depending heavily on the fortunes of his young poet friend. Although Shelley was already married, he and young Mary Godwin fell in love, despite the objections of Mary's parents (William Godwin had remarried in 1801) and the objections of Shelley's wife, Harriet. In June, 1814, at a time when Mary Godwin would not even have been seventeen, she and Shelley eloped, in company with Jane Clairmont (William Godwin's stepdaughter) on a journey to France and Switzerland. The three returned to England and found themselves mired in scandal; in addition, Shelley faced bleak financial days. The three passed the summer of 1816 in Switzerland, and it was during an evening that summer, while staying in Lord Byron's villa, that the story of Victor Frankenstein first occurred to Mary Shelley. She soon began writing her first work, later to be titled *Frankenstein*.

The return to London in September of 1816 ushered in a series of disasters in Mary's life. One of her half-sisters, Fanny Imlay,

committed suicide, and this tragedy was soon followed by the suicide of Shelley's wife, Harriet. Then in June, 1819, Mary's first son, William, died.

Shelley legally married Mary Godwin shortly after Harriet's death, and their fourth child, Percy, was born soon afterward. On July 8, 1822, Mary was confronted by yet another tragedy; while spending the summer in Italy, Shelley was drowned in a boating accident. He was a month short of thirty years of age. Several days after the accident, Shelley's body was washed ashore, and, shortly afterward, in Byron's presence, the body was cremated.

Mary returned to England in 1823, and to her amazement, she found herself a celebrity. *Valperga*, her second novel, was selling well, and *Frankenstein* (1818) had been successfully dramatized.

Among Mary's other novels, *The Last Man* (1826) is of more than passing interest, for it is among the first novels of its kind to treat the notion that human society may someday be destroyed by a pestilence, an idea that today's authors frequently employ—for example, Richard Matheson in his novel *I Am Legend*.

Mary's next novel *Lodore* (1835) is based on the ordeals and frustrations which she and Shelley suffered during 1814; then, in 1836, Mary Shelley's father, William, died, and in 1844, her son Percy, her only surviving child, came into the title of inheritance after the death of her father-in-law, and soon she was able to hand over the task of household management to her daughter-in-law. Mary Shelley herself died peacefully in February, 1851, at the age of fifty-four.

## GENERAL PLOT SUMMARY

The outside frame narrator, Robert Walton, writes to his sister about his preparations for an expedition to the arctic regions; later, after the trip is underway, we learn in another letter that the expedition is stranded by enormous ice blocks. While stranded, they see in the distance a strange figure of gigantic proportions being pulled by a dogsled. The next day, an emaciated man is found adrift outside the expedition boat, and he is taken aboard and nursed somewhat back to health. After approximately a week of recovery, he tells the following story to Walton:

He is Victor Frankenstein, and he was born to a distinguished family who were constantly concerned with the welfare of the poor

and the underprivileged. When Victor was very young, his family adopted a young girl named Elizabeth, who was raised with Victor.

As Victor was growing up, he was fascinated with varying accounts of alchemy and other related pseudo-sciences, and when he attended the University of Ingolstadt, he began studying all the natural sciences, hoping that he could discover how to overcome death and decay. He began an intense course of study designed to allow him to create life in the laboratory, and finally, after years of intense studying, until he was at the point of injuring his health, Victor was able to collect the various parts of cadavers until he had accumulated enough to create a gigantic creature. Upon completion and upon giving the creature a spark of life, Victor Frankenstein was horrified by the monstrosity of his own creation, and he fled in terror. For a long while, he was sick with brain fever, and for about two years, he knew nothing about the whereabouts of his "creation." However, one day, as he was preparing to return to his family home, he received a letter stating that his young seven-year-old brother had been murdered. The girl who was accused as being the murderess was a close friend of the family; Victor was immediately certain that she was innocent. Intuitively, he felt that the creature whom he had created—and then rejected—was responsible for the murder of his brother. Victor attempted to save the young girl, but his efforts were futile, and she was hanged for his young brother's murder. As a result, Victor felt that he was responsible for the two deaths.

Thus, seeking solitude and the consolation of nature, he climbed high into the mountains and then, suddenly, from a distance, he saw his creature approach him. The creature told how he had survived during the last two years. When Frankenstein gave him life and then deserted him, the creature had great difficulty simply surviving until he found a deserted shack next to the cottage of some poor people; he observed the daily routine of the family through a crack in the wall, and by doing this, he was able to learn to speak and, later, to read and write. After he had learned these things, he accidentally discovered Victor's journal of scientific experiments in the pocket of an old jacket, and thus he learned of his genesis. Now he has sought out his creator for the purpose of asking a favor. Since he, the creature, is so monstrous and so repulsive that he is rejected by all of humankind, he asks his creator to create a companion for him, similar to himself, someone who will not reject him. He promises that if he has a companion, he and his mate will flee from the



civilized world and never be heard of again. Victor is reluctant to agree to the proposal, but he finally relents and promises to make the creature a companion.

After renewing his scientific studies in London and elsewhere, Victor settles in a small isolated village in Scotland, where he begins his dreaded and horrible task. As he works, he begins to ponder the consequences of his work, and he changes his mind. He decides that if he creates yet another creature, this one might be even more evil, and, together, the two monsters might begin a race of monsters of untold proportion. He therefore destroys his work, and at the moment of destruction, the creature appears and curses Frankenstein and threatens vengeance, saying that on Frankenstein's wedding night, he will be there to torment him.

Soon afterward, Frankenstein discovers the body of his closest friend, Henry Clerval; Clerval has been strangled. In spite of the creature's warning, however, Frankenstein continues to make preparations to marry Elizabeth, the girl who was raised with him, who has been his lifelong love. On their wedding night, as Frankenstein is securing all of the possible entries to their wedding suite, he hears horrible screams and returns to the bridal chamber to find his bride strangled. He sees the monster fading into the darkness.

Frankenstein pledges that he will follow the monster to the ends of the earth until he can finally find it and destroy it. His pursuit leads him into the arctic regions, where he is taken aboard Robert Walton's expedition ship.

Shortly after he completes his story, Frankenstein dies, and the monster makes an appearance in the dead scientist's room, announcing to Walton that he plans to make a gigantic funeral bier and burn himself in the fire; then he springs aboard an ice raft and is carried away by the waves, lost in the darkness and the distance.

## LIST OF CHARACTERS

### **Robert Walton**

An arctic explorer who discovers Victor Frankenstein near death.

**Victor Frankenstein**

A young scientist; the creator of the "monster"; a modern Prometheus.

**Caroline (Beaufort) Frankenstein**

Victor Frankenstein's mother; she dies of scarlet fever when Victor is seventeen.

**Alphonse Frankenstein**

Victor's father; a noble humanitarian.

**Ernest Frankenstein**

Victor's brother.

**William Frankenstein**

Victor's youngest brother; he is killed by Victor's "monster."

**Justine Moritz**

An orphan, adopted by the Frankenstein family. She is accused of being the murderess of young William Frankenstein and is executed.

**Henry Clerval**

Victor Frankenstein's closest friend; he is killed by the "monster."

**Elizabeth Lavenza**

A young girl who is adopted by Victor's parents; she becomes Victor's wife and is murdered by the "monster" on her wedding night.

**M. Krempe**

A professor of natural philosophy at the University of Ingolstadt; one of Victor's teachers.

**M. Waldman**

A benevolent, kindly professor who introduces Victor to matters "between heaven and earth."

**Mr. Kirwin**

An Irish magistrate.

**The Frankenstein "Monster"**

The creature created by Victor Frankenstein; the monster is a victim of misunderstanding.

**M. De Lacey**

Once an aristocrat, he incurs the wrath of the French government and is exiled.

**Felix De Lacey**

The son of M. De Lacey; a hard-working, loving son.

**Agatha De Lacey**

The daughter of M. De Lacey.

**Safie**

Felix's fiancée; she escapes from her father's home in Turkey and seeks out Felix, who is exiled and living in poverty.

**Margaret Saville**

Walton's sister.

## CRITICAL COMMENTARIES

### AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION (to the 1831 edition)

This introduction, which is traditionally included in every edition of the novel, explains how *Frankenstein* came to be written. The

poet Byron, Mary's husband Shelley, Byron's physician Polidori, Mary Shelley, and Jane Clairmont, all figures who were either important Romantic writers (such as Shelley and Byron) or who were close friends or lesser writers, discussed the possibility of writing a horror story. At Byron's suggestion, they all decided to write a ghost story. This was in the summer of 1816. "We will each write a ghost story," said Lord Byron, who began a ghost story which ultimately was never completed, but a fragment is printed at the end of his poem "Mazeppa." Shelley wrote a story based on an incident in his early life, but it is not an important work. Polidori created a vampire story and, hence, in this summer of 1816 two of the most lingering gothic figures in Western civilization were created—the Frankenstein monster and the Vampire figure.

Mary Shelley then tells us that her story was born out of a nightmare that she had. She writes: "I busied myself to *think of a story*—a story to rival those which had excited us to this task. One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror."

Mary began her story on a chilling night in December; at first, it was meant only to be a short story, but at the urging of her husband, she increased the story to its present length.

## PREFACE. 1817

Unlike the later Author's Introduction of 1831, this preface was written and published along with the novel in 1817. In it, Mary Shelley refers to a "Dr. Erasmus Darwin" as being a friend of the family (as a historical note, he was the grandfather of the famous evolutionist, Charles Darwin). By mentioning his name, Mary Shelley hoped to give her novel a scientific and a medical credence which it otherwise would not have had. Her real motivation, however, is purely Romantic. She acknowledges that while her story is "impossible as a physical fact, [it] affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield." She claims that her novel is "exempt from the disadvantages of a mere tale of spectres" because she intends to "preserve the truth of the elementary principles of human nature." In this statement, she expresses the Romantic desire to delineate the irrational impulses of human nature.

She then relates the events which initiated the writing of her story, and she concludes her preface by stating that "the following tale is the only one which has been completed." With this concluding remark, *Frankenstein* begins.

According to Leonard Wolf, author of *The Annotated Frankenstein*, this preface "was entirely written by Percy Shelley."

## LETTER 1: TO MRS. SAVILLE, ENGLAND

The story of Frankenstein and his "creation," his monster, is framed by the story of the arctic explorer Robert Walton. Walton, at present, is in St. Petersburg, Russia, and he is gathering a crew for a lengthy arctic expedition. He relates that it has taken him almost six years to make sufficient preparations for this sea voyage. He has even taken all sorts of physical exercise in order to harden himself for the severe rigors of the cold arctic regions. He also relates that he does not intend to depart for the Arctic until the month of June, but that he does intend to leave for another town very soon. In Walton's concluding remarks, we discover that Mrs. Saville is the narrator's sister, Margaret.

The use of an epistolary story as a frame is an established and clever literary device because it enables the writer to sound more convincing, and it adds another level of verisimilitude. To anticipate the end of the story, this is the person who will actually see the monster; thus, we will, by knowing Walton, believe more readily in the existence of the monster. Certainly in the numerous movies made about Frankenstein's monster, the ending almost always implies that the monster *could* be seen again, someday, in another part of the world. Thus, Mary Shelley tries very early in the novel to make the reader believe that the creation of the monster is possible and that he is, in many ways, almost superhuman.

Since this novel was written by a woman who was in close contact with the great nineteenth-century Romantic poets and whose husband was one of the greatest of the Romantic writers, we can anticipate that this novel will be filled with many Romantic concerns and allusions. Among these Romantic literary practices is, perhaps foremost, the concept of the "Romantic Quest." That is, the frame character here is on a quest for the unknown. Likewise, Dr. Frankenstein will also experiment later with the unknown when he creates

his creature/monster. The quest of the Romantic can take all sorts of forms, from Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798) to Byron's "Childe Harold," both of which are poems alluded to during the course of the novel, along with an abundance of allusions to William Wordsworth's poetry.

## LETTER 2: TO MRS. SAVILLE, ENGLAND

In this second letter, Walton tells his sister that he has hired a vessel and has at last assembled a crew, a good crew which, he says, will be able to endure many hardships. He is now in a seaport, Archangel, and he is extremely lonely because he has no friend with whom he can share his Romantic visions nor with whom he can share his enthusiastic response to life. Walton is twenty-eight, unmarried, and he writes to his sister, "I greatly need a friend who would have enough sense not to despise me as romantic, and affection enough for me to endeavour to regulate my mind." Luckily, Walton discovers that the master of the ship whom he has hired is just such a remarkable person; he has an extraordinary mildness of manner, as well as a deep compassion for human emotions. The ship's master was once very much in love with a young girl, but she, unfortunately, was in love with a boy so poor that her father would not consent to the union. The master—although he was deeply in love with girl—could not bear to see her unhappy, and so he bestowed enough money upon the young couple so that they could marry with her father's blessings.

Walton then ends his second letter by describing his feelings on the eve of his voyage to the "unexplored regions" and to "the land of mist and snow" that he will soon encounter. He says that he hopes to have his imagination inspired similar to the best of the Romantic poets because he feels that there is still a "love for the marvellous, a belief in the marvellous, intertwined in all my projects, which hurries me out of the common pathways of men, even to the wild sea and unvisited regions I am about to explore." This statement is the very essence of one of the many facets of Romanticism; it contains a yearning to search for the unknown, coupled with a lure of dangerous oceans and unexplored regions, plus a passionate response to a new challenge, and, finally, it mentions the now-famous albatross from Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner."

It is significant that Walton's inspiration will eventually be echoed by Victor Frankenstein when he desires to create life, because this "god-like" desire contains a concept so lofty and mighty as to awe one. In addition to this parallel between Walton and Frankenstein, Walton's loneliness will also be felt by Victor Frankenstein when he leaves his home and enrolls at the University of Ingolstadt. He will find no other colleagues who are interested in his Romantic pursuits. Solitude is, therefore, one of the strong characteristics of the Romantic inclination; numerous Romantic odes were written to—and about—"solitude."

The mention of the ship's master is not just an accidental fictional touch by Mary Shelley. The story of the ship's master's unrequited love and unselfish generosity expresses the Romantic concern for the lowly and the rustic, and it also focuses upon the sentimental aspects of love—that is, these two young people must have their love consummated at any cost. The sacrifice that the ship's master makes for the young couple is a highly Romantic gesture.

### LETTER 3: TO MRS. SAVILLE, ENGLAND

This letter finds Walton well into his voyage. He has now entered the arctic regions, and he is in good spirits, partly because his crew has proved to be a good one. Floating sheets of ice, however, continually pass them. Yet these massive islands of ice do not unnerve or distress Walton. "Success *shall* crown my endeavours," he writes his sister. "What can stop the determined heart and the resolved will of man?"

These enormous, floating sheets of ice once again align the atmosphere of the novel with Coleridge's poem and with other Romantic works, but Mary Shelley's construction is never obvious or mechanical. It is a part of Walton's nature that he *would* notice certain phenomena that another type of narrator would not notice. In addition, these vast sheets of ice also prepare the reader for the later fact that the ship will become stranded due to an enormous ice jam, thereby allowing Victor Frankenstein to come aboard.

### LETTER 4: TO MRS. SAVILLE, ENGLAND

This letter is composed of three separate entries. In the first entry, dated August 5th, Walton tells his sister that the ice has sur-

rounded the ship, and he is aware of the severity of the situation. He tells her that they were lost, stranded by plains of ice when suddenly "we perceived a low carriage, fixed on a sledge and drawn by dogs, pass on towards the north at the distance of half a mile; a being which had the shape of a man, but apparently of gigantic stature, sat in the sledge and guided the dogs." About two hours later, the imprisoning ice cracked, and Walton's ship was freed. The next morning, Walton encounters a man who, we learn, has been stranded with his sledge on an ice floe. Before he is taken aboard, though, the stranger asks where Walton's ship is bound, an inquiry which astonishes Walton because the man seems to be nearly frozen, starving, and terribly emaciated. Walton writes, "I never saw a man in so wretched a condition."

After two days, the stranger recovers slightly, and Walton relates that the man's eyes "have generally an expression of wildness, and even madness." Yet if anyone is kind to him, he responds with "a beam of benevolence and sweetness that I never saw equalled." Yet generally, the stranger is extremely melancholy and in great anguish even though Walton feels that "he must have been a noble creature in his better days."

Walton inquires about the reason for the stranger's presence in this isolated place, and the stranger replies simply that he has come here "to seek one who fled from me." Walton tells him that he saw a man the day before, crossing the ice with some dogs drawing a sledge. The stranger's interest is immediate, and he asks a multitude of questions about the route which the "demon" travelled. He is not, we should note, unaware that his keen interest in this creature excites Walton's and others' curiosity; likewise, he knows that they have all been very considerate about his own emotional state. Obviously, this man is a deeply sensitive and high-strung individual.

His health gradually improves, but he remains "very silent and appears uneasy when anyone except" Walton enters the cabin. Already, Walton has begun to love him as a brother, we realize, and we also realize that the stranger's constant, deep grief fills Walton with sympathy and compassion.

The second entry is written eight days later, on August 13; clearly, Walton's affection for the stranger increases every day. In fact, the stranger's health improves greatly, and before long he is constantly on deck, looking out into the vast, empty regions for the sledge that preceded his own. Interestingly, Walton does not yet



know the stranger's name nor his story. Yet the stranger is inquisitive about Walton's history, and Walton tells him of his desire to find a friend and of his "thirst for a more intimate sympathy with a fellow mind than had ever fallen to my lot." The stranger understands Walton's feelings, and he tells Walton about such a friend whom he once had but, he says sadly, his friend is now "lost."

The next entry is written six days later, on August 19; the stranger approaches Walton and is ready to explain to him his unique situation. He promises to tell Walton his story the next day.

This section concludes, then, the outside frame, and, at its end, we are ready to hear the story of the stranger who, we will soon learn, will be Victor Frankenstein. Everything about his sudden appearance on the frozen arctic floes of ice, seemingly pursuing something which he refers to as a "demon," prepares us for the fact that the story which we are about to hear will be filled with mystery, bizarre events, and fantasmagoric elements. We are therefore first introduced to the monster—even though we don't know much about him yet, for Walton describes him simply as a "creature of gigantic stature." This is Mary Shelley's clever method of suggesting an objective reality for the monster; this is an aspect which critics such as Muriel Spark fail to consider when they maintain that the monster and its creator are the antithetical halves of a single person.

In a typical Romantic fashion, this concluding section contains a scene in which there is an immediate emotional and an almost spiritual rapport between two sensitive souls, each responding deeply to the other. Walton is sympathetic to the stranger's despair; he sees within the stranger a soul that is "elevated," one that is capable of "intuitive discernment," as well as having "a quick and never-failing power of judgment, a penetration into the causes of things." These and numerous other images come directly from much nineteenth-century British poetry, especially from Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," echoes of which we find especially from such lines as "while with an eye/ Made quiet by the power of harmony,/ And the deep power of joy,/ We see into the life of things."

## CHAPTER 1

The stranger begins telling his story to Walton even though neither we—nor Walton—knows his name yet. He says that he was