**Works Cited:**

Sylvia, Susan J., and Bonnie Flaig. “Frankenstein.” Masterplots, Fourth Edition, Nov. 2010, pp. 1–3. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lkh&AN=103331MP417409320000100&site=lrc-plus.

**Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley**  
**Given Name:**Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin  
**Born:**August 30, 1797; London, England  
**Died:**February 1, 1851; London, England

[**Quick Reference**](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/lrc/detail/detail?vid=31&sid=7f36fe25-bd4e-4c20-9357-a12a03a259a7%40sdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9bHJjLXBsdXM%3d#toc)

**First published:** 1818

**Type of work:** Novel

**Type of plot:** Gothic

**Time of plot:** Eighteenth century

**Locale:** Europe and the Arctic

[**Principal characters**](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/lrc/detail/detail?vid=31&sid=7f36fe25-bd4e-4c20-9357-a12a03a259a7%40sdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9bHJjLXBsdXM%3d#toc)

*Robert Walton*, an explorer

*Victor Frankenstein*, an inventor

*Elizabeth*, his foster sister

*William*, his brother

*Justine*, the Frankensteins’ servant

*Henry Clerval*, Victor’s friend

*The Monster*,

[**The Story:**](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/lrc/detail/detail?vid=31&sid=7f36fe25-bd4e-4c20-9357-a12a03a259a7%40sdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9bHJjLXBsdXM%3d#toc)

  English explorer Robert Walton’s ship is held fast in polar ice. As his company looks out over the empty ice field, they are astonished to see a sledge drawn by dogs speeding northward. The sledge driver looks huge and misshapen. At night, an ice floe carries to the ship another sledge with one dog and a man in weakened condition. When the newcomer learns that his is the second sledge sighted from the ship, he becomes agitated.

Walton is greatly attracted to the newcomer during his convalescence, and as the ship remains stuck in the ice, the men have leisure time to get acquainted. At last, after he has recovered somewhat from exposure and hunger, the man, Victor Frankenstein, tells Walton his story.

Victor is born into an aristocratic family in Geneva, Switzerland. As a playmate for their son, the parents adopt a lovely little girl, Elizabeth, of the same age. Victor and Elizabeth grow up as brother and sister. Much later another son, William, is born to the Frankensteins.

At an early age, Victor shows promise in the natural sciences. He devours the works of Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus and thinks in his ignorance that they had been the real masters. When he grows older, his father decides to send him to the university at Ingolstadt. There, he soon learns all that his masters can teach him in the field of natural science. Engaged in brilliant and terrible research, he stumbles by chance on the secret of creating life. Once he has gained this knowledge, he cannot rest until he has employed it to create a living being. By haunting the butcher shops and dissecting rooms, he soon has the necessary raw materials. With great cunning, he fashions an eight-foot monster and endows him with life.

As soon as Victor creates his monster, however, he is subject to strange misgivings. During the night, the monster comes to his bed. At the sight of the horrible face, Victor shrieks and frightens the monster. Overcome by the horror of his act, he becomes ill with a brain fever. His best friend, Henry Clerval, arrives from Geneva and helps to nurse him through his illness. He cannot tell Clerval what he has done.

Terrible news then comes from Geneva. William, Victor’s young brother, had been killed at the hand of a murderer. He was found strangled in a park, and a faithful family servant, Justine, was charged with the crime. Victor hurries to Geneva. At the trial, Justine tells a convincing story. She had been looking for William in the countryside and, returning after the city gates had been closed, had spent the night in a deserted hut; she cannot, however, explain how a miniature from William’s neck came to be in her pocket. Victor and Elizabeth believe the girl’s story, but despite all of their efforts, Justine is convicted and condemned.

Depressed by these tragic events, Victor goes hiking over the mountainous countryside. Far ahead on the glacier, he sees a strange, agile figure that fills him with horrible suspicions. Unable to overtake the figure, he sits down to rest. Suddenly, the monster appears before him. The creature demands that Victor listen to his story. The monster begins to tell him that when he left Victor’s chambers in Ingolstadt, everyone he met screamed and ran from him. Wandering confusedly, the monster finally found shelter in an abandoned hovel adjoining a cottage. By great stealth, he remained there during daylight and at night sought berries for food. Through observation, he began to learn the ways of humankind. Feeling an urge to friendship, he brought wood to the cottage every day, but when he attempted to make friends with the cottagers, he was repulsed with such fear and fury that his heart became bitter toward all people. When he saw William playing in the park, he strangled the boy and took the miniature from his neck. Then during the night, he came upon Justine in the hut and put the picture in her pocket.

The monster now makes a horrible demand. He insists that Victor fashion a mate for him who will give him love and companionship. The monster threatens to ravage and kill at random if Victor refuses the request; but, if Victor agrees, the monster promises to take his mate to the wilds of South America, where they will never again be seen by humankind. It is a hard choice, but Victor feels that he must accept.

Victor leaves for England with his friend Clerval. After parting from his friend, he goes to the distant Orkney Islands and begins his task. He is almost ready to animate the gross mass of flesh when his conscience stops him. He cannot let the two monsters mate and spawn a race of monsters. He destroys his work. The monster is watching at a window. Angered to see his mate destroyed, he forces his way into the house and warns Victor that a terrible punishment will fall upon the young man on his wedding night. Then the monster escapes by sea. Later, to torment his maker, he fiendishly kills Clerval.

Victor is suspected of the crime. Released for lack of evidence, he returns to Geneva. He and Elizabeth are married there. Although Victor is armed and alert, the monster gets into the nuptial chamber and strangles the bride. Victor shoots at him, but he escapes again. Victor vows to follow the monster and kill him.

Weakened by exposure, Victor dies on Walton’s ship in the ice — Elizabeth, William, Justine, and Clerval remain unavenged. The monster comes to the dead man’s cabin, and Walton, stifling his fear, addresses the gigantic, hideous creature. Victor’s is the greater crime, the monster says. He had created a man, a man without love or friend or soul. He deserves his punishment. The monster then vanishes over the ice field.

[**Critical Evaluation:**](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/lrc/detail/detail?vid=31&sid=7f36fe25-bd4e-4c20-9357-a12a03a259a7%40sdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9bHJjLXBsdXM%3d#toc)

*Frankenstein* began as a short story written by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley while she was on summer vacation in Switzerland with her husband, poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and with poet Lord Byron and physician-writer John William Polidori. The novel was first published anonymously in 1818 and was then followed by a revised version in 1831, crediting Mary Shelley as the author and including an autobiographical introduction that reflects on her life and on the novel’s authorship.

The novel’s themes center on the social and cultural aspects of society during Shelley’s lifetime, including the movement away from the intellectually confining Enlightenment. The characters in the novel reflect the struggle against societal control. The monster, in particular, is an outcast from society, and the reader is able to empathize with his subsequent rage at being ostracized. Nature and science, opposing forces during this time period, are important themes shaping the novel.

Early nineteenth century society’s views of human standards were associated with the natural sciences. Some literary critics suggest that nature and physiology, specifically anatomy and reproduction, are linked in literature. Irregularities in the human standard were therefore viewed as unacceptable by society, and through an innate reaction, these differences were rejected. Even though Frankenstein’s monster develops language skills, emotion, and consciousness, he appears as a grotesque being and is spurned by society because he does not fit any ideal.

Shelley employs many stylistic techniques in *Frankenstein*. She uses explorer Robert Walton’s epistolary communication with his sister as part of an outer frame structure that segues into a flashback of Victor Frankenstein’s experiences leading up to and after the creation of the monster. First-person narrative is used in Walton’s voice, while the core chapters offer Victor’s personal narration. In addition, Shelley uses dialogue to provide the thoughts of other characters, such as the monster. Also evident are characteristics of gothic horror, including a foreboding setting, violent and mysterious events, and a decaying society.

Many themes in *Frankenstein* represent not only the social and political theories of Shelley’s time but also those that followed. For example, Sigmund Freud’s Oedipus complex can be seen in Victor’s attempts to replace his deceased mother by “birthing” a being who represents her. Elaborating on this theory, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan adds a pre-Oedipal stage, in which young children learn language through nonverbal communication. This stage is evident in Victor’s attempt to learn the language of the sciences, and in the creature’s attempt to seek knowledge about society and language. Victor and the creature are “doubles” (or mirrors) of each other because they are both struck with the inability to successfully communicate with society. This theme demonstrates the balance of the conscious and unconscious aspects of human behavior.

Another theme, the search by the novel’s male protagonists for a teacher who will provide them political and social guidance, represents Lockean theory, which claims that education determines a person’s level of value in society. For example, during a conversation with Victor, Walton denounces his lack of formal education, demonstrating his lack of a friend (or formal teacher) to lead him to enlightenment. Additionally, Victor acknowledges his father’s lack of leadership in guiding his interest in the natural sciences.

Prior to the 1970’s, most criticism about *Frankenstein* focused on Shelley’s life and the story behind the novel’s authorship and creation. As the novel received increased critical attention, evaluations started to focus on its storyline and characters as a reflection of the author. This change in focus was, in part, due to the emergence of feminist theory in the 1970’s and 1980’s, a theory that began to establish the academic value and significance of female writers. Critics have evaluated the work’s lack of dominant female characters, but also have examined its attention to the idea of the Romantic artist.

*Frankenstein* has been further critiqued through the lens of gender. In the novel, the feminine is not central; rather, the novel features characters who have both masculine and feminine qualities. Furthermore, relationships between women figure in the novel, namely the relationship between Justine and Elizabeth. When Justine faces execution, the two establish a bond that begins during a brief conversation about their shared experiences. Female relationships were tenuous in Shelley’s own life, too, particularly because of the premature death of her mother and her questionable relationship with her half-sister, Jane (later known as Claire), who was rumored to have had a child with Shelley’s husband.

*Frankenstein* revolutionized the genres of gothic literature, science fiction, and horror stories, and elevated the status of the Romantic artist. Written by Shelley when she was only nineteen years old, the novel offers artistic flare, originality, and a maturity beyond Shelley’s age. In the last decades of the twentieth century, this work reached a new status in critical evaluation. It remains an undisputed fictional masterpiece.

*Essay by:*“Critical Evaluation” by Susan J. Sylvia;; “Critical Evaluation” by Susan J. Sylvia; “The Story” by Bonnie Flaig

[**Further Reading**](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/lrc/detail/detail?vid=31&sid=7f36fe25-bd4e-4c20-9357-a12a03a259a7%40sdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9bHJjLXBsdXM%3d#toc)

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Hoobler, Dorothy, and Thomas Hoobler. *The Monsters: Mary Shelley and the Curse of Frankenstein*. New York: Little, Brown, 2006. A biography describing the creation of *Frankenstein* and demonstrating how the themes of this novel correspond to the events of Shelley’s life.

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Smith, Johanna M., ed. *Frankenstein: Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 2000. Essays define and discuss the novel through the lens of psychoanalytic, feminist, gender, Marxist, and cultural criticism.

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