

**BLOOMSBURY
TEACHER
GUIDE**

FRANKENSTEIN

Fe Brewer,
Mary Hind-Portley and
Gwen Nelson

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CONTENTS

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Fe

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An honest review of *Frankenstein*, from Fe's dad: 'Not bad for nineteenth-century literature. A bit wordy, though.' (Dave Jarrett, 2024)

Gwen

It is no exaggeration to state that without Fe, this book would not exist – or, at least, not exist for another decade or so. Her ability to get things done, single-mindedness and drive are what got us over the line. To be frank, Fe should have her name in a larger font on the front cover, and probably more royalties than she's going to get. Mary is an absolute asset to English teacher-kind and should be treasured. She is a clever, knowledgeable and diligent teacher and it's been a real privilege to work alongside her. Together, Mary and Fe have been pragmatic and gracious, while I've battled a fair few demons (depression, anxiety and a very nearly fatal dose of carbon monoxide due to a decrepit gas fire) during this process.

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Mary

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FOREWORD

As a child in the 1990s, I watched reruns of the 1960s American family sitcom, *The Munsters*. Herman Munster was the well-meaning, slightly dim husband to Lily and father to Eddie. Each family member was based on a classic Gothic creature: Eddie was a werewolf, Lily a vampire, and Herman was a tall, broad, grim-looking Frankenstein's monster. My initial idea of who and what The Creature is was shaped by these Saturday mornings in front of the TV, and added to by various appearances of Lurch in *The Addams Family*, multiple episodes of *Scooby Doo*, and even the depiction of a giant letter 'H' in *Sesame Street*.

When I finally read the original novel at age 17, I was struck by the profound and poignant moment when The Creature reflects on its own misery: '*All men hate the wretched; how, then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things!*' The Creature is at times a philosopher, at others a critic, but always an intelligent, nuanced character who voices the most challenging ideas in this perplexing novel. The reality of Frankenstein's monster is worlds away from the cartoonish green man with a bolt through his neck.

So, the real *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, poses a unique challenge for teachers in the English classroom. They must navigate arcane language; classical allusion; multiple narrators; non-linear structure; abstract philosophical ideas, and a story wrapped in over a century of myth and obfuscation.

How, then, can teachers peel back these layers and find the nuanced, subtle reality of Mary Shelley's work? Teaching literature is very often about plotting a course of discovery through a seemingly impenetrable landscape, but it's also about the experience of a text and personal response to human themes. I would defy anyone not to feel some of the agony of The Creature, or the bleakness of the ice at the end of the novel.

In this book, Fe, Mary and Gwen have provided an astonishing treasure trove of knowledge and practical ideas for teachers. Their combined experience, depth of understanding and expertise is evident in the beautifully sequenced, thoughtful approach to the text. Above all, the focus on questions which are threaded through every part of this guide, is a sure way to support students not just to know, but to think, reflect and respond to this timeless masterpiece.

Jennifer Webb

Disciplinary literacy

The following is a graphic summary of some of the commonly recurring concepts in disciplinary literacy. These are signposted across the text and our *downloadable resources*, to maximise opportunities for impact. 

- | | |
|--|--|
| • Analysis:  | Retrieval:  |
| • Inference:  | Structure:  |
| • Context:  | Tracking the text:  |
| • Summarise:  | Comparison:  |

Themes

The following is a graphic organiser for some of the key themes (*included in our downloadable resources* ). Shelley explores a number of ideas and themes throughout the novel. To support you in navigating key areas for these, we have included them in the 'at a glance' section but also indicated where they arise through a series of icons, so that you can easily find where Shelley builds on them in order to explore them with your classes.

- | | |
|---|---|
| • Ambition and legacy:  | • Narrator and narration:  |
| • Betrayal and guilt:  | • Obsession:  |
| • Crime and justice:  | • Power and responsibility:  |
| • Death and grief:  | • Prejudice:  |
| • Destiny and fate:  | • Rejection and its consequences:  |
| • Family and companionship:  | • Revenge:  |
| • Isolation and loneliness:  | • Society and social class:  |
| • Knowledge and discovery:  | |

INTRODUCTION: THE INCEPTION OF A WORK OF LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE

How did Frankenstein come to be?

In 1815, Mount Tambora erupted in Indonesia. The ash cloud resulted in storms and freak weather across the globe. A year later, during 'the year without a summer', one of the most notorious groups in literature gathered in the Villa Diodati, Switzerland, to entertain themselves and escape the weather. This was the beginning of Frankenstein.

This point of confluence was incredible – not just the summer at the villa, but Mary Shelley's genealogy and her social, political and literary circles. The group at the villa comprised Mary (Godwin), Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, Claire Clairmont and Byron's physician, Dr John Polidori. Well-read, intelligent, vibrant and bored, the group considered how to entertain themselves in such circumstances – thus the telling of ghost stories ensued. This, along with the darkness of the storms, provided fertile ground for the creation of new and terrifying stories, such as Polidori's 'The Vampyre' and *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. However, it was to be Mary's *Frankenstein* that had the greatest lasting impact on the literary and cultural Western world and is therefore now set for examination.

A short biography of Mary Shelley

The beginning: Mary the daughter

On 30 August 1797, Mary was born to Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. The couple had only married a handful of months earlier, when Wollstonecraft fell pregnant by Godwin, creating a public scandal. Regardless of this, the pair lived a life at the centre of literary London, with a circle of friends who were influential eighteenth-century writers, thinkers and what we would now call scientists. This life was not to continue, however, as a mere 11 days after Mary's birth, Wollstonecraft died of puerperal fever, a loss that would define Mary's life and influence many of the ideas in *Frankenstein*.

Grieving for his wife, racked with debt and keen to provide young Mary with a mother, Godwin married Mary-Jane Clairmont, who had a daughter, Jane Claire Clairmont (known as Claire). Unfortunately, Mary and her stepmother's relationship was far from that of a happy mother and daughter and the household was often filled with tension.

Despite this, their home was also a place that provided a significant element of Mary's literary education. The house was frequented by many of the names present in Key Stages 3 to 5 curricula: a roll call of the famous poets and writers of the Romantic period, such as Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, Coleridge and, later on, Percy Shelley. Legend has it that Coleridge once read aloud *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) at a gathering, prompting an eight-year-old Mary to hide behind the sofa and listen.

Mary also grew up surrounded by the work of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, through both her published works and the stories that she had written for her first daughter, Fanny Imlay. From these, Mary was able to keep her mother a constant presence in her life. Wollstonecraft's radical ideas lived on through her major work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and influenced many of Mary's actions – for example, her 'elopement' with Percy and the desire to live unconventionally.

Mary the girl

Much of Mary's childhood was spent in day schools or being educated at home, through the input of her father and stepmother's intellectual circles. However, Mary was often an ill child, which prompted Godwin to send her away from home for the sake of her health. In 1811, Mary was sent to boarding school in Ramsgate and then to live in Scotland. While in Scotland, Mary found a best friend, Izabella, and was granted physical freedom in the Scottish countryside, giving her space and time away from the difficulties of living in the Godwin-Clairmont household and the complex relationships therein. Later, she would write of her time in Scotland:

“

'I lived principally in the country as a girl, and passed a considerable time in Scotland...; my [...] residence was on the blank and dreary northern shores of the Tay, near Dundee [...] they were not so to me then. They were the eyry of freedom, and the pleasant region where unheeded I could commune with the creatures of my fancy.'

(Shelley, 1831)

”

The rugged and romantic landscapes of Scotland brought her peace, freedom and a great sense of the restorative power of nature – another idea that features in her novel.

Mary the lover

Aged 16, Mary returned to London and the tensions of the Godwin-Clairmont household. During her time away, Godwin had become friends with Percy Shelley, and was financially indebted to him. Percy was 21, and his intelligence and appearance made him immediately attractive to Mary. Despite Percy already being married, the two quickly began an affair. By October 1814, Percy separated from his wife, Harriet, and regularly met Mary at her mother's grave in St Pancras churchyard. This secluded spot offered Mary a quiet place to study and commune with her mother, but also a place for the two to secretly meet, with the aid of her stepsister, Jane Clairmont (later known as Claire or Clair Clairmont).

Godwin did not approve of the relationship between his daughter and Percy, although the reason for this is unclear. Perhaps Godwin, despite his radical beliefs, disapproved of Mary having a relationship with a married man, or perhaps Godwin could see the signs of future mental instability in Percy's character and worried about how this would affect his daughter's future life. 'Shelley would go on to harm every one of the Godwin girls whether he meant to or not.' (Gordon, 2015, p. 75)

First travels in Europe and debt

To escape London, Percy and Mary ran away to France, along with her stepsister, Claire. The trip was, in many ways, a failure from the start: Mary was terribly sick on the way and they were soon discovered by Mary's stepmother. Refusing to return to London, they made their way to Switzerland, but soon ran out of funds and were forced to return home. Though brief, the journey proved to be of future benefit, as they discovered 'Castle Frankenstein' and its legend of Konrad Dippel, who tried to bring the dead back to life.

In London, Percy discovered that his financial worries had worsened, as Harriet, his wife, had emptied his bank account. Consequently, Mary, Claire and Percy had to live in relative poverty and as social outcasts. Their woes continued as Harriet gave birth to a boy, Percy's son, and Mary also fell pregnant. Claire also spent increasing amounts of time with Percy, taking advantage of his distaste for pregnant women – a situation that upset both women.

In November 1814, after living apart for a time to avoid Percy's arrest for debt, their financial situation improved and Percy, Mary and Claire moved into lodgings together. Interestingly, pages of both Mary and Claire's journals that may have related to this time period have been removed, suggesting that there was still some tension between the three of them, and speculation remains as to the depth and physicality of the relationship between Percy and Claire. Percy then encouraged Mary and his friend, Thomas Hogg, to form a relationship to distract Mary from her jealousy of Claire. Percy wanted to develop his plans for a community based on free love, and Hogg agreed

to further this plan. In a bid to please Percy, Mary attempted a relationship with Hogg, but was far too in love with Percy to act on this. She did, however, promise Hogg that she would consider this once her baby was born.

1815: Mary becomes a mother

On 22 February 1815, Mary's first child, Clara, was born eight weeks early, living for just 13 days. She wrote to Hogg: 'My baby is dead... It was perfectly well when I went to bed.' (Bennett, 1995, p. 8) Mary had little support and mourned the loss of her first baby alone. Her grief can be seen in the themes of birth, loss and death in *Frankenstein*. Following the loss of the baby, Percy and Mary retreated to the countryside in April for a few nights, as Percy had become less self-absorbed and more supportive towards Mary.

In June, Mary discovered that she was pregnant for a second time, and she and Percy moved to Bishopsgate, near Eton, and undertook a programme of reading as Mary's pregnancy symptoms improved. In January 1816, Mary gave birth to Willam, affectionately known as Willmouse.

1816: The entrance of Byron

In 1816, Byron became a significant influence in the lives of Mary and Percy, after Claire met him by chance at a theatre in Drury Lane. Claire soon shifted her attention away from Percy and engaged in a variety of ploys to gain his attention. Byron, like Percy, was already married (and also rumoured to be having an affair with his half-sister), but this did not prevent him from encouraging her. She sent dozens of letters to him, portraying herself as a radical woman and, in a bid to entice him further, plotted to bring Byron and Mary together. Once again, missing journal pages prevent us from knowing how Claire brought the two together. Her ploys briefly succeeded, and in the early spring of 1816, Claire became pregnant by Byron. Unfortunately for her and the child, he soon lost interest in her.

Switzerland

In April 1816, Mary, Percy and Claire set off to Switzerland. Percy wished to leave England, as he was frustrated by Godwin's continued refusal to accept Mary and Percy's relationship and by critics' response to his poem 'Alastor'. It was Claire who suggested Switzerland, as she wished to be near Byron, who was heading for Geneva to escape the scandal that he had caused in London. For Mary, who was terrified of losing her son as she had her first baby, the trip seemed potentially beneficial for little Willmouse.

The journey to Switzerland was not exciting. Mary's travel sickness, the disruption in weather patterns and general food shortages made the journey incredibly unpleasant. Like their journey from Switzerland earlier, this scenery eventually found its way into the landscapes in *Frankenstein*.

Once in Geneva, the travellers settled into routines, reading and writing in the Maison Chapuis. Never settled, though, Claire remained anxious in anticipation of Byron's arrival, which eventually came with expected flamboyance, complete with a carriage like Napoleon's and Byron's menagerie. Byron, accompanied by his friend and physician, Dr John Polidori, soon began acquainting themselves with the other guests.

June 1816

As the journey had been hampered by poor weather, so too was their time in Geneva, and the travellers spent much of their time indoors and sheltering from storms. On 15 June, they gathered to read a play by Polidori, which sparked discussions about human nature and creation, Dr Darwin's experiments with electricity and Polidori's notes from a lecture on animals given by William Lawrence, an anatomist. Raised in a household with visitors from various academic fields, Mary was not new to science, and here again we can see the seeds of *Frankenstein* beginning to germinate. The final catalyst needed for *Frankenstein* soon came in the form of Byron setting a challenge to everyone to pen a ghost story.

Mary could not have had a more conducive environment for penning a Gothic classic. Further evenings were spent discussing ghosts and sharing readings of various Romantic and Gothic works, including Coleridge's *Christabel*. At one point, Percy became hysterical and claimed to have seen a horrific vision of a lady with eyes instead of nipples on her breasts, an event that left the party much disturbed.

There are different accounts of Mary's genesis of *Frankenstein*. Percy (1818, preface) and Polidori's accounts differ from Mary's introduction to the 1831 edition. Mary's later account of this event explores the difficulties of the creative process, but Percy's 1816 introduction omits this and is supported by Polidori's diary account. This adds another layer of complexity to our understanding of the creation and writing of *Frankenstein* and the stability of the text. Whatever the true origins, when the men took a trip for a few days, some time between 22 and 30 June, Mary began writing her story, originally opening it with 'It was on a dreary night in November'.

She continued to develop it over the coming days and weeks, layering the narrative with multiple perspectives, exploring her experience of birth and death, and thoughts around the concept of men as creators. She was not alone in writing, and other works generated from the time at Villa Diodati were Polidori's 'The Vampyre', Byron's *Manfred* and Percy's 'Mont Blanc' and *Prometheus Unbound*.

Autumn 1816

In September 1816, Mary and Percy returned to England and moved to Bath to avoid the bills from Bishopsgate. Mary spent the autumn working on her manuscript, deciding to add Robert Walton as an important new character. Her writing process was hampered, however, by personal tragedies.

In early October, Percy received a disturbing letter from Fanny, Mary's half-sister and her mother's first daughter. Percy rushed to Bristol to help Fanny but was unable to, as she had already travelled to Swansea; there, she committed suicide with an overdose of laudanum. Mary grieved heavily for her loss.

Another tragedy occurred in December, as Percy received notice that his wife, Harriet, had also committed suicide. Now free to marry and seeking custody of his two children by Harriet (in whom he had formerly shown little interest), Percy decided that he and Mary should be wed to bring some respectability to their relationship. On 30 December, the two were finally wed. Despite such significant developments, Mary continued to work on *Frankenstein*.

January 1817

In January, Mary discovered that she was pregnant again and wrote anxious letters to Percy, who was away with Leigh Hunt in Hampstead. Percy told Mary to come to London and she then joined him on the 25 January. Once again, Mary was in the company of literary society and also part of a complex household. The Hunt household had many similarities with her family: a husband who was having an affair with his wife's sister and a sister who had mental health issues. Having lost her half-sister to suicide, Mary was also concerned for the health of Claire, who had recently given birth to her child by Byron, Alba, later known as Allegra.

In the spring, Mary and Percy moved to Albion House, Marlow. To support Claire, an elaborate plan was concocted to pass off Alba as one of the Hunt children. In order to do this, the Hunts were invited to stay at Albion House for an extended period of time. It is with this complex backdrop that Mary refined the manuscript of *Frankenstein*.

Mary suffered a long period of exhaustion following the birth of her second daughter. She was unable to produce enough milk to sufficiently feed the baby and she also worried about William's health in the cold and damp Albion House. She longed to return Alba to Byron but by this time, he had disappeared from Italy and gone to Greece or elsewhere. Mary and Percy were also in debt, and their relationship suffered further as he spent time in London with Claire rather than with Mary. His recent publishing of a pamphlet on the death of British liberty caused Mary to fear that he would be hanged as a traitor. She worried too about her own work, fearing that her publishers would raise the issue of Victor's feelings for Elizabeth as, in this edition, they were first cousins.

It took nine months for Mary to complete her final iteration of the 1818 edition of the story. This is not insignificant, as she was writing during pregnancy. Mary recognised this and referred to the novel as her 'progeny' – Gordon (2015) points out that the time of the novel spans from 17 December to 17 September, which links with the pregnancy. By the time her daughter and third child, Clara, was born in September, Mary's novel was complete. In

addition to typing a fair copy of the manuscript for publication, Mary also worked on *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817), to which Percy contributed two travel letters and his poem 'Mont Blanc'. This was published in November.

1818

In January, *Frankenstein* was published anonymously in a print run of 500 copies (the convention at the time) by Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor and Jones. As Percy had contributed the preface, many readers and critics inaccurately attributed the novel to him. Despite not being enthusiastically received by critics, the novel's reputation began to build by word of mouth.

In the spring, the Shelleys, Claire and Alba left England for the third time, travelling via Calais to Italy. A factor in their decision to move back to Italy was Percy's health, as the hot climate of Italy was suggested as a cure. At this point, Byron was in Venice and Mary hoped to leave Alba with him. While the trip was mingled with intellectual gatherings, writing and sightseeing, for Mary, their time in Italy was blighted by further tragedy. In September 1818, Clara became ill and died of a fever, and in June 1819, William too became ill and died of malaria. Consumed by grief, Mary fell into a deep depression, feeling cursed by death. Mary also found herself pregnant once again, and eventually began work on her new novel *Mathilda*, which would not be published until 1959.

Mary's final child, Percy Florence, was born on 12 November 1819. Like her other children, he would not survive infancy and, after one final pregnancy resulting in a miscarriage that nearly killed her, Mary would never fall pregnant again.

The 1820s

Throughout the 1820s, Mary continued to write, and she and Percy continued to travel despite their increasingly strained relationship. At one point, Percy had become interested in sailing and bought a boat with a friend. This would prove a fatal mistake. On 8 July, Percy and Edward set sail from Livorno to Lerici. The weather was stormy and the boat was spotted in difficulty. Ten days later, Percy's body would be washed up on the shore. After his friends took relics from the body (including Leigh Hunt taking Percy's heart), the body was burned in a funeral pyre on the beach. Leigh later refused to give Mary the preserved heart, but was eventually persuaded to hand it over. The heart was discovered, 30 years later, preserved inside the pages of 'Adonais', inside Mary's travelling desk.

In August 1823, Mary returned to London after an absence of five years, where she began to plan her novel *The Last Man*, published in 1826. It was at this point that *Frankenstein* had become a play, with five different versions being performed. The play attracted protesters against its monstrous subjects, holding placards, but this served to promote it further.

Due to copyright laws at the time, Mary made no money from this appropriation of the play, so she knew that she had to continue to write to survive, as she only had a tiny allowance from Percy's father. Mary edited a book of Shelley's poems, wrote for the *Westminster Review* and began *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* in 1828 (published in 1830), then *Lodore* (published in 1835), followed by *Falkner*, her last novel, in 1837. Her last non-fiction work was *Rambles in Germany and Italy* in 1844. She also spent 16 years writing short stories for ladies' annuals. In addition, she revised *Frankenstein* for a new edition. This edition is the one set for study for GCSE, as it is the edition most commonly found in English schools.

1831 edition

Mary revised *Frankenstein* so that Bentley, the publisher, would own the copyright and therefore a new edition could be published and sold. This time, 3,000 of the 3,500 copies were sold in the same year. This edition carries the preface written by Mary and is her attempt to revise her life story, implying to readers that she was a married woman in 1816. Spark (2013) comments that Mary had originally written when 'not acquainted with her own mind', but that in 1831 she had reached 'a higher degree of consciousness' (p. 127), preferring the 1831 edition. Mellor (1990) comments that the 1831 edition reflects how Mary's philosophical views 'changed radically', linked to her 'pessimism' caused by the deaths of her children and husband, betrayals by close friends and her financial difficulties. These Mary saw as part of an 'indifferent universe' (p. 100). There are powerful arguments for both texts and no doubt you will have your preferred edition.

This is a list of the main changes to help you with the 1831 edition:

- Elizabeth Lavenza becomes an unconnected orphan and not a cousin, and takes a more passive role.
- The role of Frankenstein's family in encouraging their son's interest in science is changed to that of a stranger.
- The influence of Professor Waldeman on Victor while at Ingolstadt University is more powerful and more evil in intent.
- Fate takes the place of individual choice/free will, and nature is presented as a significant force.
- Male ambition is portrayed as harmful.
- Female characters are innocent but unable to save themselves.
- The glacier at Chamounix is seen by Victor as 'working of an immutable law' rather than just a wonderful spectacle.
- The parallels between Victor and Walton are made stronger, with Walton sharing Victor's craving to achieve the impossible.

- One significant aspect is unchanged in both editions: Victor dies unrepentant, hoping that someone else may have the success that he had not.
- A new preface is written by Mary, focusing on the conception of the story and romanticising the origins at the Villa Diodati.

What is the significance of Frankenstein in our literary and cultural landscape?

"Frankenstein" is a product of criticism, not a work of literature', states Fred Botting (1995, p. 1). Yet *Frankenstein* is dominant in our literary, cultural and critical landscape. Even from first publication in 1818, the novel received criticism that it was lacking in morality and piety, and it is this and the debates around the novel's themes that have contributed to its fame.

What place does the novel have in our literary heritage? For teachers, it is often a text included in Key Stage 3 as part of a study of the Gothic, but also a set text for some exam boards, which may have been what brought you to this book.

Mary Shelley's imagination and skill, along with the novel's own heritage, linked with Percy Shelley, Byron and William Godwin, has now assured its place in the literary canon and also its significant influence in film and media. The novel was first published in 1818 (with a revised version following in 1831) and then a play by Richard Brinsley Peake was performed in 1823, called *Presumption; or, the fate of Frankenstein*, watched by Mary Shelley herself: '... lo and behold! I found myself famous.' Botting (1995, p. 3) suggests that this play 'signalled Victor's transformation into a modern myth'. Certainly, the nineteenth century saw many mutations of the novel, and the first confusions between the Creature and its creator emerged, leading to the common misconception that the Creature is called 'Frankenstein'. The novel has mutated into its own 'hideous progeny', with Frankenstein the Creature as the star, as seen here in an article for The Student Voice Network:

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'When asked to describe Frankenstein, most people will give you an image of a bright green blockheaded, mindless monster with stitches across the forehead and bolts in the neck that walks with the speed of molasses; allowing his victims time to run away, and killing those who don't run fast enough by ripping out their hearts.'

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This is likely to be the predominant image that our learners have of the Creature and one that teachers need to counter.

The novel has had considerable influence in the theatre world. Richard Brinsley Peake's production is described – by Beverley Hart writing for Offord (2018) – as one of the first stage adaptations. Another significant production by Henry M. Milner, titled *Frankenstein – Or, The Man and the Monster*, was performed in July 1826. These productions mutated the story, introducing elements that have become common associations: the Creature as a monster who carries our fears and suspicions about what is different, and the hyperbolic depiction of Victor Frankenstein's laboratory and the moment of the Creature's creation. It is these misrepresentations that lead to misconceptions for learners. Hart outlines the progeny of the novel, including Frank N. Furter in Richard O'Brien's *The Rocky Horror Show*.

Early film versions built further on these theatrical interpretations, again showing the creation of the Creature in full cinematic glory, and J. Seale Dawley's film (1910, Edison Studios) can be found on YouTube. While the Edison Film Company wanted to eliminate 'all actual repulsive situations', the Creature's creation is highly dramatic and forms a significant portion of the film's 12 minutes, reaching far beyond Shelley's description of the event – definitely one to watch and discuss with pupils.

Perhaps the most famous incarnation of *Frankenstein* is that directed by James Whale, with the Creature played by Boris Karloff. His visualisation of the Creature is far removed from Shelley's descriptions but established the most iconic image of Victor Frankenstein's creation: tall, monstrous, green-faced and bolt-necked, with a cube-like head.

Having experienced success with this film, and keen to capitalise on it, *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) was released, followed by a whole franchise. Over time, other studios produced comedy versions, horror ensemble versions and parodies: clear evidence of the centrality of the text to Western theatre and film tradition. Even Mel Brooks produced a version, called *Young Frankenstein* – a parody of the Universal horror films.

Paul O'Flinn (1995, p. 22) states that there 'is no such thing as "Frankenstein", there are only "Frankensteins"'. It is a text that invites rewriting and reproducing, being itself rewritten by Mary Shelley.

What does this mean for teachers?

O'Flinn (1995) posits that texts can alter in three major ways:

1. through the operations of criticism
2. through a shift from one medium to another
3. as a result of history unfolding.

Cultural understanding of *Frankenstein* has been shaped by all three of these. *Frankenstein* is often a point of reference when discussing scientific developments, for example. As such, we must consider where our learners

find themselves when they encounter the text. How do we support them to peel away the cultural laminations to grapple with the layers of meaning in the text?

1. Operations of criticism

We need to place the reading and close analysis of the text first, but support our understanding as teachers with the use of literary criticism. Fishelov (2016) states that it was the feminist approaches of the 1970s and 1980s that placed *Frankenstein* as a text of literary significance. Indeed, it was described by D.W. Harding (1957, p. 45) as 'one of those second-rate works, written under the influence of more distinguished minds'. Fishelov comments that 'the novel did not generate a cumulative body of positive criticism or a significant token of appreciation from the contemporary literary elite' (2016, p. 5); instead, Mary Shelley was overshadowed by the literary reputation of her husband. The rise in feminist criticism, such as Moers' *Literary Women* (1978) and Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), did much to place *Mary Shelley* centre stage, and it is from this standpoint that the current book explores this influential work.

2. Through a shift from one medium to another

Frankenstein and its tropes have permeated the film and TV industries, as well as advertising and journalism; has any other novel been so influential? In addition, the novel has been adapted and adopted by the world of comic books and graphic novels since 1939 (Murray, 2016).

This guide focuses on the literary merits of the text and on centring Mary Shelley as a key literary figure in the landscape of the nineteenth-century novel.

3. As a result of history unfolding

O'Flinn (1995, p. 22) suggests that '*Frankenstein*'s meaning alters as time passes' – for example, changes over time in politics, and industrial, technological and scientific development, as well as war and peacetime. Advances in science, particularly genetics, are often linked with *Frankenstein*, e.g. Frankenstein foods. While the first edition of the novel was written during the 1810s, its impact and presence are still evident today and it has depth and relevance for all learners.

SECTION 1

WALTON'S LETTERS

At a glance

› **Summary quotation:** 'you cannot contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation' (Letter 1)

› **Big Question:** How does Shelley use Walton's narrative voice at the beginning of Frankenstein? Why must Walton and Victor meet on the deadly ice floe?

› **Significant plot events:**

Letter 1:

- Walton writes to his sister, Margaret Saville, explaining his progress so far with his Arctic expedition.
- He gives his current and next geographical location: St Petersburg and then Archangel.

Letter 2:

- In Archangel, Walton writes again to his sister, telling her about his crew.
- He tells her that he is certain of success, and writes of the wondrous Arctic landscape.

Letter 3:

- The length of this letter shows that there seems to be little worth writing to his sister about.
- His crew are as yet unfazed by any of the cold weather or icebergs that they encounter.
- He reassures his sister that he will not 'rashly encounter danger', while also boasting of the anticipated triumph of his expedition.

Letter 4:

- Walton and his crew are surrounded by ice and thick fog.
- Once the fog clears, Walton and his crew catch sight of a gigantic man-like creature being pulled on a sledge.
- In the morning, there is another unexpected encounter with a stranger on a sledge, on the brink of death.

- Walton takes charge of the stranger's care and both men begin talking to each other.
- The stranger insists on telling Walton the story that explains why he is in such a wretched state on the ice floes.

› **Character focus:** Robert Walton, his sister Mrs Margaret Saville, Victor Frankenstein (the stranger), the Creature

› **Key themes:**

- Knowledge and discovery 🔍
- Ambition and legacy 🏛️
- Isolation and loneliness 🧑🏻
- Society and social class 🗑️
- Narrator and narration **N**

› **Handle with care:**

- the portrayal of an emaciated and vulnerable Victor who is close to death

Why?

'Why' is an important question, not only within the world of the text but when also considering authorial intent and meaning.

- In Letters 1 and 2, Walton was certain that his expedition would be a magnificent success. Why is he less certain in Letters 3 and 4?
- Why does Shelley provide the reader with the merest glimpse of the Creature in Letter 4?
- Why does Victor Frankenstein enter the narrative in Letter 4 and not Letter 1?
- Why begin the narrative in the setting of the Arctic?
- Why is it important that readers are introduced to two ambitious men of science, rather than just one?

S-T-R-E-T-C-H questions

- Why does Shelley use a frame narrative?
- Why does Shelley choose to use letters for Walton's narrative?

What?

What happens?

Walton's Letter 1: Early December

Letter 1 is set in St Petersburg. From here, Walton (Shelley's first narrator) writes to his sister, Margaret Saville. The letters provide us with biographical information about his ambitions, the purpose of his travels and his previous (and failed) attempts at becoming a poet. Here, he describes a rather romantic hypothetical account of what his journey to the North Pole will be like. He proudly narrates his time aboard whaling ships, working among merchant seamen. He informs Margaret of his travel plans to Archangel, giving the reader a clear sense of time and place in his narrative. He ends the letter confidently informing her that he will be successful in his expedition.

Walton's Letter 2: Late March

In Letter 2, Walton is in Archangel, where he continues to tell his sister of the progress of his expedition, informing her that he has begun to collect 'my sailors' for his expedition further north. Early in the second paragraph, he reveals the extent of his loneliness: 'I have no friend' – or rather, no one of equal social status that he can name as a friend. Walton, a gentleman, is unable to truly befriend his crew, who are of a much lower social class. However, he does show the ability to respect and admire one of his crew, the ship's master, who shares the romantic story of his crew-man's youthful love for a Russian woman. As Walton narrates in his letter, when the master learned of who his fiancé really loved, he broke off the engagement so that she could marry for love rather than money.

Later, Walton attempts to articulate the range of emotions that he feels upon the now-inevitable moment of departure across the northern ice floe. He is both excited and terrified, so signs off his letter in a much more doubtful tone than the first.

Walton's Letter 3: Early July

Letter 3 is a short but enthusiastic letter to his sister, informing her that he is safe and 'well advanced on his voyage'. He (or rather Shelley) makes a point of stating that nothing interesting enough has occurred for him to inform her of, bar the odd leak and 'stiff gale'. This is both a literal and figurative calm before the storm of Victor's entrance in the next letter.

Walton ends this short letter with a barrage of rhetorical questions that emphasise his determination to succeed, while also showing his naivety, as he asks, 'What can stop the determined heart and resolved will of man?', while surrounded by a typically Gothic sublime landscape and sailing headlong into weather and temperature conditions over which he has no control.

Walton's Letter 4: Late July

Walton and his ship are surrounded by ice and a dense fog. The fog does not clear until 2.00pm, allowing Walton and his crew to see the vastness of the ice floe in which they are trapped. Out of the mist, the crew report a peculiar sight of a 'being... in the shape of a man' who is 'gigantic in stature' yet as ethereal as 'an apparition', thus providing a moment in the text that veers towards the supernatural and the Gothic genre. Soon, the ice and sea give a little, releasing their grip on the ship.

The next morning, the crew are excited by the appearance of another man on a sledge, drifting towards their ship on a large piece of ice. Exhausted and emaciated, this man is brought aboard the ship and cared for by Walton and his men. The stranger's 'gentle manners' are fascinating to the crew and endearing to Walton, who quickly forms an attachment to him. Soon, Walton begins to love the stranger 'as a brother', meaning that at this moment, Walton's self-imposed loneliness is at an end.

Social and historical context

Literary context: Shelley's chimera of literary sub-genres

Raised among such a wide range of intellectuals, and incredibly well-read, Shelley had a plethora of genres and conventions with which to play when writing her novel. While it is easy to assume that Shelley borrowed from only two genres (science fiction and horror), her novel is actually a chimera of genres and forms.

These include bildungsroman: a narrative about the events and experiences of the main protagonists as they grow up and become adults. Each narrator – Walton, Victor and the Creature – narrates their life, from their early childhood up to their present adulthood.

The epistolary form of narration can also be found, involving or consisting of letter writing. Walton's letters adhere to the conventions of an early novel in literature: Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* (1740). This form, as used by Shelley, evolves the convention (a conceit) of the 'found manuscript', thus:

- framing the events as 'true'
- framing the published text to not really belong to a well-known author.

Letters, and different narrators within narratives, are embedded throughout the text, either explicitly – so that the content is included in the narrative – or implicitly, where a letter is mentioned or implied but not included in the

narrative. Examples of how this applies to the text can be found in the online teachers' resources.

Historical context: An Age of Exploration

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the Age of Exploration. Having discovered new worlds since the fifteenth century, several European nations were now keen to capitalise on their maritime success by both establishing new trade routes and also gaining new scientific knowledge. Even landed gentlemen would take great risks for the adventure and potential fame involved in daring and risky expeditions.

Many attempts were made to explore the North West Passage, a sea lane between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. If successful, this would open up a new trade route between Asia and Europe, although the seas were hostile and vessels such as Walton's were often stuck in ice. From even a cursory reading of Walton's letters, we are aware of the significance of a successful expedition through the Northern ice floes that would go beyond that of the explorers themselves.

It is likely that Shelley, along with her Romantic contemporaries, was aware of explorers such as William Baffin (c. 1584–1622), a well-renowned Arctic explorer of his day, who, like Walton, gained his sea-faring legs through whaling. Baffin is most well known for the discovery of Baffin Bay – named after him – which is situated between Canada and Greenland.

Literary context: Variations on a theme – Shelley's Byronic hero(es)

Walton, Victor Frankenstein and the Creature each share characteristics of the Byronic hero, but with slight variations in their character.

Oxford Reference defines a Byronic hero as follows:

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‘Characteristic of or resembling Byron or his poetry; that is, contemptuous of and rebelling against conventional morality, or defying fate, or possessing the characteristics of Byron's romantic heroes, or imitating his dress and appearance.’
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Marquette University's 'Glossary of the Gothic' describes Byronic heroes as arrogant, intelligent, rebellious, self-destructive, mysterious, magnetic and attractive (to the heroines, particularly in Gothic literature).

See the teaching resources for this chapter about the social and historical context, useful for A level teachers and anyone teaching this to an able GCSE group, covering the following social, historical, literary and geographical contexts:

- the Age of Exploration
- the geographical locations in the letters
- further detail about the concept of the Byronic hero.

Vocabulary in context

Word	Quotation	Definition
Letter 1		
ardent	'I am too ardent in execution and too impatient of difficulties.'	having intense emotion or enthusiasm (Rekurs in all letters and Chapters 2, 3, 4, 9, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, 21, 23, 24)
forebodings	'You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings.'	in anticipation of something happening, especially approaching or overhanging evil
inspired	'Inspired by this wind of promise, my daydreams become more fervent and vivid.'	to put spirit, life or energy into; to quicken, enliven, animate; to cheer, encourage; to incite, stir
fervent		of persons, their passions, dispositions or actions; ardent, intensely earnest, often used in relation to love or hatred (from 17th century onwards)
diffusing	'There, Margaret, the sun is for ever visible, its broad disk just skirting the horizon and diffusing a perpetual splendour.'	to send forth (an immaterial, or abstract thing) in many or all directions; to spread among a large number of people; to disseminate
splendour		magnificence; great show of riches or costly things; pomp, parade (transitive verb: to move with splendour)
Letter 2		
dauntless	'those whom I have already engaged... are certainly possessed of dauntless courage.'	not to be daunted; fearless, intrepid, bold, undaunted
assailed	'If I am assailed by disappointment, no one will endeavour to sustain me in dejection.'	to attack with physical violence, assault
endeavour		to try, to make an effort for a specified object (objective); to attempt
inclinations	'my early inclinations'	a person's natural tendencies or preferences