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Victor Frankenstein
Brilliant young scientist; creates monstrous Creature, then abandons him.

Elizabeth Lavenza
The Frankensteins’ adopted daughter; murdered by Creature on night of her wedding to Victor.

William
Victor’s young brother; murdered by the Creature.

Caroline Beaufort
Victor’s mother; dies caring for Elizabeth.

Alphonse Frankenstein
Victor’s father; loves and protects him, but critical of his studies; dies after Creature murders Elizabeth.

Mrs Saville
Walton’s sister; receives his letters about Frankenstein.

Waldman
Charismatic professor; mentor to Victor.

Krempe
Victor’s brilliant but critical professor.

De Lacey family
Creature learns about human society from them; they reject Creature as a monstrosity.

Justine Moritz
Adopted servant of Frankenstein family; framed by the Creature for William’s murder and executed.

Henry Clerval
Victor’s closest friend; calm, lover of nature; murdered by the Creature.

Robert Walton
Arctic explorer; records Victor’s story.

Waldman

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OVERVIEW
About the novel and its author

Frankenstein was published anonymously in London in 1818. It attracted immediate interest because it was generally assumed to be the work of the latest young rebel poet in town, Percy Bysshe Shelley, who certainly signed his name to the book’s Preface. In fact, it was written by his 19-year-old wife, Mary. She was the daughter of famous literary parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft (who had died giving birth to her). She had eloped with Percy to Europe four years earlier. Pregnant at 16, by the time she wrote Frankenstein Mary had already given birth to (and buried) two baby daughters. Her son William was to die of fever in her arms a year later. Realities of life and death circled constantly around the young couple.

Frankenstein is a horrific story of how one brilliant man, after discovering the secret of life, builds and animates a hideous Creature which he then rejects in disgust. As a consequence, the Creature goes on a rampage against the man’s family and friends. Maker and Creature finally pursue each other to the death in the Arctic wasteland. The novel was a runaway success: ‘It seems to be universally known and read’ a friend wrote to Percy in August 1818 (Florescu, p.155).

Since then, Frankenstein has never been out of print, and the name ‘Frankenstein’ has become widely recognised, even by people who haven’t read the novel, although it is often found attached mistakenly to the Creature rather than to Victor Frankenstein, the supposed creator-hero. As such, it has become a frequently heard metaphor in public speeches and media comment to indicate a once possibly good idea that has grown out of control. Not one of the many play or movie versions of the story to date has represented the material as Mary Shelley actually put it together. Remember this as you study a range of material: consider why changes might have been made.

Mary Shelley’s novel interested people from the start because it went beyond a horror story to pick up serious issues of the day and present them in a highly stimulating format. She referred to her protagonist as a ‘natural philosopher’ (the term ‘scientist’ wasn’t used until the mid 1830s). For his time, Victor was working at the outer limits of new scientific
enquiry. Even though 21st-century science has long moved on from 19th-century experimental guesswork, Shelley’s novel continues to pinpoint key elements of an ongoing discussion about the aims and applications of knowledge. Powerful, potentially dangerous ideas continue to engage the human psyche and need to be talked about. Creative fictions like Frankenstein make a vital space for conversation.

Synopsis

**Letters and Book One**

In the Arctic, Captain Walton writes letters to his sister, revealing both his loneliness and his aspirations to be a great discoverer. Some time later, he and his crew sight a gigantic man on a sledge (the Creature). Next day, his ship takes on board a mysterious stranger (Victor Frankenstein), whose own sledge has been stranded on the breaking ice. Walton feels immediate friendship for him. When Frankenstein hears of Walton’s passion for knowledge, he is motivated to tell his own tragic story, now nearing its end. It is partly a confession, partly a justification; it is also a warning to Walton, who is ignorant of the dangers inherent in satisfying his curiosity for adventure.

After filling in his childhood background, Frankenstein relates his fascination with electricity and the study of alchemy and mystic philosophy. After his mother’s death, he goes to university, where he is inspired by M. Waldman, an enthusiastic chemistry professor who claims that science can reveal nature’s secrets. He begins his own research into discovering ‘the principle of life’ and, after a period of intense study, finally succeeds in animating lifeless flesh. Frankenstein goes on to build a monstrous human being, but, when he brings it to life, he is so appalled by its appearance that he rejects both his creation and science, and has a nervous breakdown.

Two years later, restored by natural scenery and Henry Clerval’s friendship, Frankenstein thinks he is free to go on with life. Meanwhile, the Creature has begun to take revenge on the creator who abandoned him by murdering William and Justine, two people Frankenstein loves.

**Book Two**

Frankenstein is haunted by guilt and despair but cannot reveal what he knows. Eventually, a confrontation occurs with the Creature, who hides ‘alone and miserable’ in the icy mountains around Chamonix.
The Creature demands that Frankenstein listen to the long story of his innocent attempts (over two years) to grow up, learn about the natural world, learn to read books and discover his horrific self. He explains how undeservedly and cruelly he has been rejected by the humans he has tried to communicate with; this has made him vengeful. He concludes by extracting a reluctant promise from Frankenstein to begin the creation of a female mate for him.

**Book Three**

Before marrying Elizabeth as planned, Frankenstein makes an excuse to his family so that he can spend another year alone. Continually watched by the Creature, he retreats to a remote island to work on a female mate, but is so overwhelmed by guilt that he rips apart his second creation. Enraged, the Creature first kills Frankenstein’s friend Clerval and then Elizabeth, on her wedding night. Because no one believes Frankenstein’s horrific story of the real murderer, he becomes the lonely avenger, doomed to wander after the equally lonely Creature to the ends of the earth. This is where he meets Walton, and dies before completing his revenge.

Finally, Walton encounters the Creature on board, mourning Frankenstein, before it goes to destroy itself in the ice field. The Creature’s last speech makes Walton understand better the tragically complex relationship experienced by creator and creature.

**Character summaries**

**Captain Walton**

Twenty-eight years old; Arctic explorer; ambitious but lonely. He records the story of Frankenstein’s and the Creature’s lives in letters to sister Margaret. Forced by natural dangers and mutinous crew to give up voyage of discovery.

**Mrs Margaret Saville**

Walton’s elder sister. Understood to be recipient of Walton’s letters – an essential link in the complex narrative chain, although she has no direct role in plot.

**Victor Frankenstein**

Late 20s but seems older; a brilliant but flawed man who creates a creature that becomes his enemy when he rejects it. He dies on Walton’s ship after telling the tragic story of his life.
The Creature
Develops mentally from infancy to adulthood in the few years from his creation to self-destruction after Frankenstein’s death. He begins as an innocent but turns into a murderous enemy of humans after being rejected. Narrates his story to Frankenstein, who incorporates it into his narrative to Walton.

Henry Clerval
Victor’s contemporary and closest friend; son of ‘narrow-minded trader’ who prevents him from studying with Victor at Ingolstadt. Helps nurse Frankenstein to health after his collapse; murdered by the Creature. He never asks about the secret that haunts Victor, and Frankenstein deliberately fails to confide in him.

William Frankenstein
About five years old; Victor’s brother; murdered by Creature as revenge against Frankenstein.

Justine
Early 20s; young woman in Frankenstein’s household; accused of William’s murder by evidence planted on her by the Creature. Her execution compounds Frankenstein’s guilt for rejecting the Creature.

Elizabeth Lavenza
Late 20s; nobleman’s daughter adopted into Frankenstein family; manages household when Victor’s mother dies; anticipated wife for Victor but murdered on wedding night as revenge for Frankenstein’s destruction of the Creature’s mate.

Alphonse Frankenstein
Victor’s gentle elderly father, public figure in Geneva; married late in life to Caroline Beaufort. He tries to help Victor find happiness in life; collapses and dies after Elizabeth’s murder.

Caroline Beaufort
Victor’s loving mother, dies (when Victor is 17) of highly contagious scarlet fever caught from Elizabeth.
Krempe
A ‘squat little man’ with ‘repulsive countenance’, professor of natural philosophy at Ingolstadt university; an intelligent egocentric modern thinker, whose blunt, contemptuous manner frustrates young Victor by making him feel ignorant.

Waldman
Charismatic and benevolent professor of natural philosophy (chemistry) at Ingolstadt university; charms Victor back to enthusiastic and ambitious study.

De Lacey
Parisian exile; old, blind father of Felix and Agatha; living in forest cottage near Ingolstadt. Through observation and eavesdropping, the Creature begins to absorb a complete education from this family while secretly helping them in daily tasks. Because of his blindness, he’s chosen by the Creature as first contact and is sympathetic.

Felix
A sad young man, thwarted by Safie’s ungrateful father from marrying her when they escaped from France to Italy. He drives the Creature away, mistaking its approach to his father as a threat.

Agatha
The gentle young sister of Felix; faints with horror on seeing the Creature.

Safie
Beautiful ‘Arabian’; wife of Felix. Daughter of Christian Arab mother and Turkish ‘Mahometan’ (Moslem) father. Her courageous actions to be reunited with Felix teach the Creature about the power of love.

Note on page references
Throughout this text guide we have provided page references to the two editions of Frankenstein published by Penguin: the ‘Black Classics’ edition (with the black strip across the bottom of the front cover, 2003) and the ‘Red Classics’ edition (2006). Note that the Red Classics edition does not contain the 1831 ‘Author’s Introduction’ or the 1818 Preface. Page numbers are given as B and R respectively.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Mary Shelley

‘[W]hat terrified me will terrify others …’ (Author’s Introduction 1831, p.9B)

Percy Shelley was aware that Mary’s novel contained extraordinary material, guaranteed to disturb readers. Best-selling author Sir Walter Scott was one of the few positive reviewers. He thought it ‘excites new reflections and untried sources of emotion’ in the reader (in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, March 1818).

The third edition (1831) was revised and prefaced by Mary Shelley herself. By then, she was a widow (Percy had drowned in a boating accident in 1822), a woman writer claiming ownership of her own work. Frankenstein’s fame had been established by the 1820s through many stage adaptations in London, Europe and America, with top actors playing the Creature, habitually called ‘Monster’. Mary was amused by the way an 1823 playbill [flyer] noted the cast list, with ‘ ----, by Mr T. Cooke’, commenting that ‘this nameless mode of naming the unnameable is rather good’ (letter, cited in Florescu, p.165).

Mary describes her 1816 nightmare and the circumstances that stimulated it as the source of Frankenstein (Author’s Introduction 1831, pp.6–10B). Just as classical authors often began a fictional narrative with a ‘dream vision’ to add plausibility to their account (by putting themselves into the fiction they could claim to be describing events, rather than fabricating them), she makes serious claims for her creative nightmare as an authentic vision. The purpose of the book is moral, to ‘speak to the mysterious fears of our nature’ as well as being sensational entertainment to ‘awaken thrilling horror’.

In 1831 she refers to the novel as ‘my hideous progeny’ (child). However Frankenstein was inspired in 1816, Mary Shelley was well aware of the sorrowful closeness of birth and death by 1815, when her first baby died. She wrote: ‘Dream that my little baby came to life again – that it had only been cold & that we rubbed it before the fire, & it lived – I awake and find no baby – I think about the little thing all day’ (Mary Shelley’s Journal, cited in Florescu, p.132).