



Frankenstein:
A Modern Prometheus
Study Guide

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Meet the Characters

Mary Wallstonecraft—The sister of captain Robert Walton; he addresses all the letters containing the story to her.

Captain Robert Walton—Obsessed with finding the North Pole, his journey to the Arctic crosses paths with the tormented Victor Frankenstein.

Victor Frankenstein—A young brilliant doctor obsessed with cheating death.

The Creature—Victor’s creation abandoned by his “creator” out of fear and disgust.
Alphonse Frankenstein—Victor’s father.

Elizabeth Lavenza—Victor’s doomed fiancée.

Henri Clerval—Victor’s best friend.

William Frankenstein—Victor’s seven-year-old brother.

Old Man—A blind man whom the Creature seeks as a friend.

Krempe—Victor’s professor in medical school who pronounces Victor’s studies as entirely useless.

Plot Summary

The story of *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus* is told through the collected letters of a British explorer to his sister, Miss Mary Willstonecraft.

Obsessed with finding the North Pole, Captain Robert Walton has trapped his ship “The Discovery” in a sea of ice somewhere near the Arctic Circle. Beginning to question his hasty and compulsive expedition, he and his crew settle in to wait for the ice to crack in order to continue their voyage. Through the rising morning mist, the crew catches sight of an unnaturally large man crossing the frozen sea on a dog sled. They lose sight of him. The next day, the ice begins to break apart. The crew spot a lone man drifting toward them, marooned on a piece of ice and rescue him from the sea. When Robert questions him regarding the strange circumstances of his plight, the man introduces himself as Victor Frankenstein and begins to tell his tale.

Obsessed with finding a cure for death, Victor became a student of medical science and alchemy. His studies increasingly focus on the act of creation as the possible solution. While denounced by his Professor, Victor’s experiments at reviving lifeless matter yield success after success. Finally, Victor prepares the ultimate experiment- the creation of an entire human being. Victor gathers corpses and pieces together a perfect human male of gigantic stature. It is not until the eve of his experiment, that tragedy strikes. In the final moments of creation, Victor uses the lightning of a severe thunderstorm to provide the necessary electricity. Without warning the storm magnifies, intensifies, and sends down many more thousand watts of electricity than Victor expected. The creature is bathed in electric fire; it’s beautiful figure warped, distorted, and burned beyond recognition.

The experiment is a failure and Victor is plunged into despair. As he prepares to dispose of the body, it opens one yellow, watery eye and begins to breathe. In horrified disgust at the ugly, withered giant before him, Victor flees and sets into motion the murderous events of his own demise.

Victor, his fiancée Elizabeth, and Henri Clerval (both of whom know nothing of his experiment) travel to Greece and spend nearly a year abroad. Upon his return, Victor vows to destroy his journal and workshop, yet can find no trace of the journal in which he recorded all of his work. After destroying the workshop, Victor’s younger brother is found murdered, his neck snapped like a brittle twig. It is at this point, that Victor comes face to face with his creation, a creature filled with the murderous anger of a child which has been deserted by it’s only parent. A creature determined to wreak vengeance on his creator.

Discussion Questions

Discuss the following topics in an essay or out loud with your class.

1. What does it mean to be a parent? What responsibilities do you have to your child? What happens if you do not fulfill those responsibilities?
2. Does a lack of parental love and support justify revenge or attempting to seize that love no matter what the cost?
3. How many of the crimes committed today are crimes that develop from parental neglect or abuse? Would you hold the Creature ultimately responsible for his crimes?
4. Have you ever created something that didn't turn out as you planned or even wanted? How did you react? What if what you had created was a human life?

About the Author

Mary Shelley was born to philosophers and writers William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft in 1797. From an early age she was surrounded by prominent literary figures such as Charles and Mary Lamb and Samuel T. Coleridge. She ran off with Percy Bysshe Shelley at the age of 16 and finally married him after his first wife committed suicide. Mary's life was haunted by the deaths of her mother, who died shortly after giving birth to her, her half-sister who committed suicide, three of her children who all died as infants and finally her husband, Percy, who drowned in 1822. At 19, she and Percy stayed with Lord Byron and some friends at his villa in Switzerland. For entertainment, Lord Byron encouraged his guests to write a horror story. Mary's was *Frankenstein* which was first published in 1818. Critics did not receive it favorably, but it quickly became popular. Many consider it to be the first Science Fiction novel.

Complete Learning Plans

This LEARNING PLAN is designed for Grades 9 – 12.

Objective: To explore creativity in writing and storytelling from a Gothic Romantic perspective.

Standards and benchmarks: (LA.B.1.3) (LA.C.1.3) (LA.B.1.4) (LA.C.1.4)

Materials needed: Paper and any writing utensil or computer if available.

Introductory/Background information for Teachers and Students:

Gothic Romanticism

Gothic Literature began in the United Kingdom with *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole. It produced a “pleasing terror” in the reader, which became a popular literary device that was essentially Romantic. It is the predecessor of modern horror fiction and, above all, has led to the common definition of "gothic" as being connected to the dark and horrific.

Prominent features of gothic fiction include terror (psychological as well as physical), mystery, the supernatural, ghosts, haunted houses and Gothic architecture, castles, darkness, death, decay, doubles, madness (especially mad women), secrets, hereditary curses, persecuted maidens and so on.

Challenge: *Frankenstein* is considered to be a Gothic Romantic story. Mary Shelley was inspired to write it while vacationing with a group of fellow writers. One evening they were reading ghost stories together and Lord Byron decided to have a contest to see who could write the scariest story. Now it's time to challenge your students to write their own short story using the elements of Gothic Romantic writing. These stories were usually mysteries involving horror and supernatural elements. The settings were dark, often taking place in haunted mansions or medieval castles. Tragedy, death and monsters were also prevalent. Encourage your students to be creative and have fun.

Once their stories are finished have some of them volunteer to read theirs aloud. Then have the students give feedback. Possible discussion questions: What were the most memorable images in the story? What elements were similar to *Frankenstein*? How did it differ? How could the student make it even scarier?

For extra fun, dim the classroom lights and invite students to bring in spooky music to play while they read.

This LEARNING PLAN is designed for Grades 6-9.

Objective: To explore creativity in writing as well as understanding the skills necessary to perform multiple characters.

Standards and benchmarks: (TH.A.1.3) (TH.A.1.4) (TH.B.1.3) (TH.B.1.4)
(LA.E.2.3) (LA.E.2.4)

Materials needed: Paper and writing utensil.

Challenge: *Frankenstein* the play is a one-man show but there are several characters in it. This requires a very talented actor with diverse abilities who can create distinct characters so that the audience feels as if there's more than one actor on stage.

1. Have your students create their own monster, writing down specific characteristics about the way it looks, sounds and feels about itself.
2. Next have them write a 1-2 page dialogue between themselves and their monster trying to make a clear distinction between characters.
3. Finally, have them read their script out loud playing both parts and remembering to change their voice and demeanor when playing the monster. While one person is performing, have the audience write down two aspects of the performer's presentation that they appreciated.