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Author(s): Gladys V. Veidemanis

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Frankenstein in the Classroom

Gladys V. Veidemanis

Frankenstein is a great name for a monster. So I thought as a child, naively falling into the trap of confusing the creature with its creator as multitudes around the globe have done. And I am still reluctant to think of the monster as nameless, especially since it ended up residing so long and so intimately in the private horror chamber of my childhood imagination. Indeed, it haunts me still.

Blame my older brother! Since a five-year majority gave him access to the Boris Karloff movie which I was forbidden to see; and since, for a while, we shared a bedroom with a staircase leading to the attic; and since he had the uncanny ability, night after night, to make those stairs creak and the hulking figure to stand grotesquely over my bedside, my preoccupation with the monster was not surprising. I didn't need to see the movie to visualize the monster: the creature dwelt fully realized in the Twilight Zone of my subconscious, ready to surface in dark places or in the landscape of my unguarded fantasies. But I did need to read the novel to discern fully the reasons for the story's mythic hold not only on impressionable little girls but on the public imagination as well.

"'We will each write a ghost story,' said Lord Byron; and his proposition was acceded to." So wrote Mary Shelley, describing the circumstances that motivated the writing of the book. But only the gifted young Mary Shelley—not quite 19 years old—completed the assignment, following a horrifying dream about which she wrote,

I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on

the working of some powerful engine show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion.

The result of her efforts is a tale that exerts a hypnotic force on the reader. Most significant, she created a genuine myth, one that has captured the public fancy as well as the attention of increasing numbers of literary scholars. In the 1980s alone, critical studies of this work are proliferating at an astonishing rate.

Granted, the novel has conspicuous flaws: a monster that talks like an Oxford graduate, sentimentalized family scenes and characters, and assorted improbabilities and contrivances, for example, the fortuitous encounter of the monster with William and Justine and, even more improbable, the arrival of Saffie—Felix's Arabian sweetheart—in time to provide English lessons for the monster voyeur. Nevertheless, *Frankenstein* compels readers to consider such philosophical questions as the nature of humans, the origins of good and evil, the purpose of existence, and the claims of morality on scientific endeavor. A strong case for including this novel in the high school curriculum is easily made.

Apart from my long-standing fascination with the monster, *Frankenstein* is an excellent choice for classroom study first because students find it intriguing and intellectually stimulating, appealing in subject matter and style. It has the added advantage of relative brevity and novelty.

Second, with its three inter-nested plots, it provides us with a close study of the novel-as-novel, three intriguing narrators, marvelously etched settings, and prose that ranges from the ridiculous to the sublime. As M. K. Joseph observes: "In

spite of [Mary Shelley's] errors, which are those of a novice . . . the central idea is carried through with considerable skill and force." (M. K. Joseph, "Introduction" to *Frankenstein; Or, The Modern Prometheus*. London: Oxford University Press, 1969, p. v. Page numbers below are to this edition.)

Third, given Mary Shelley's parentage and life story, the novel provides an excellent introduction or wrap-up to a unit on the Romantic Era in English literature. In particular, the novel has the spirit and design of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Wordsworth's nature poems, the broad-ranging ideas of Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the socio/political theories of Mary Shelley's father, William Godwin. What better way to introduce these writers and their works than incidentally-on-purpose in connection with a novel which they directly influenced?

Fourth, and not to be overlooked, is that *Frankenstein* is the work of a gifted woman writer whose literary output, though disappointingly small considering her exceptional early promise, merits study and recognition. Already by the age of 25, Mary Shelley was a widow who had lost three of her four children and who faced a hard struggle to support herself and her remaining child. Yet she nonetheless succeeded in writing, besides *Frankenstein*, two travel books, four additional novels, biographical sketches, and notes on her husband's poems that scholars have found invaluable. As the child of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin and the wife of Percy Bysshe Shelley, she lived at the center of the Romantic Revolution, an intimate of the "extraordinary thinkers" (Shelley's phrase) and artists who shaped the age. By age nine she could boast of having heard Coleridge recite "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and of hearing Thomas De Quincey relate his theories on the occult. As she attests, in her "Introduction" to *Frankenstein*, "Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener," hearing them discourse on Darwin, the myth of Prometheus, and the theories of Newton, Galvani, Volta, and other experimental scientists of the age. With such credentials, Mary Shelley clearly rates as a personality and intellect to be reckoned with and enjoyed.

Finally, *Frankenstein's* central theme—"scientific aims pursued in reckless disregard of human con-

sequences"—has crucial significance today when scientists experiment with increasingly sophisticated procedures in biological and genetic engineering. Since the question of the novel—should limits be placed on scientific endeavor?—is one our generation needs to address and resolve, reading and talking about *Frankenstein* is serious business indeed.

Whether studied as part of a unit on the Romantic Age or simply as a significant novel in our cultural heritage, *Frankenstein* is best introduced by a brief overview of Mary Shelley's life, the circumstances that motivated the writing of the novel, and a survey of the intellectual and artistic currents of the Romantic Age which the novel reflects (and occasionally repudiates). The place to begin, of course, is with the "Introduction" Mary Shelley herself provided, in which she describes that memorable evening in Switzerland with Shelley, Byron, and his physician Dr. Polidori during which Byron challenged each to write a ghost story. Handouts, filmstrips, or a brief lecture can provide background on the personalities who most deeply influenced Mary Shelley's life and career—her parents, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin; her husband; and other notable literary figures of the age, such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Lord Byron, whose ideas and writings are reflected in the novel. These preliminaries are best kept to a minimum, however, with background information introduced as needed.

Since the novel is in three narrative segments, class discussion falls naturally into a three-part framework. Segment one, chapters one through eight, deals with Walton's quest for a passage through the North Pole and his rescue of Victor Frankenstein from an ice floe. In this phase, Walton functions as the "wedding guest" to Frankenstein, a ravished "Ancient Mariner" with a terrible story to tell. In the second segment, chapters nine through twenty, Frankenstein describes his encounters with the monster, who gradually takes over the narrative. Here, in a lengthy monologue, the monster describes the various stages of his physical and social acculturation, his rejection by the DeLacey family, and his determination to seek revenge after Frankenstein aborts the mate he had promised to create. Segment three, Chapters 21 to the end, recounts the monster's pursuit of Frankenstein, the annihilation of all of Frankenstein's

loved ones, and the journey to the Arctic that culminates in Frankenstein's death on Walton's ship, the monster's pledge to immolate himself at the North Pole, and Walton's seeming reformation through his encounter with Dr. Frankenstein.

Early in segment one, Walton's story, Mary Shelley invites comparison of her plot and characters with those of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." In letter II to his sister, Walton writes:

I am going to unexplored regions, to "the land of mist and snow;" but I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety, or if I should come back to you as worn and woful as the "Ancient Mariner?" You will smile at my allusion; but I will disclose a secret. I have often attributed my attachment to, my passionate enthusiasm for, the dangerous mysteries of ocean, to that production of the most imaginative of modern poets . . . there is 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. (p. 22–23)

Even with classes that have studied the poem, I like to play a recording to refresh student's memory of plot, setting, and themes. Following a review, students readily identify parallels between the two works, most notably that of Walton as the "wedding guest" and Frankenstein as the Ancient Mariner who compels Walton to hear and heed his story by exclaiming, "Unhappy man! Do you share my madness? have you drank [*sic*] also of the intoxicating draught? Hear me,—let me reveal my tale, and you will dash the cup from your lips!" (p. 28) Later, when describing his horrified flight from the animated creature, Frankenstein again compares himself with the Ancient Mariner, citing lines that depict the dread both experienced when sensing "a frightful fiend" in close pursuit. Also like the Mariner, Frankenstein is described as acutely responsive to the beauty and wonders of the natural world. Walton says, "Even broken in spirit as he is, no one can feel more deeply than he does the beauties of nature." (p. 29) Most significant, Frankenstein, the Mariner, and Walton as well are revealed as weighted with a similar albatross of guilt as a consequence of the failure of love, a turning away from family, nature, and human fellowship that eventually condemns all three to a frigid wasteland of aching solitude and enduring regret.

The middle section, the monster's story, is especially complex, with three analogical layers to be considered. On one level the monster replicates the history of human evolution, extending himself first through sensory awareness, then through the discovery of fire, thereafter moving on (with the help of books and observation of the DeLaceys) to emotional, moral, and philosophical enlightenment. On a second level, the monster is revealed as a natural Adam whom the creator has repudiated, leaving him "solitary and abhorred." (p. 130) On the third level, the monster is equated with Lucifer, the fallen angel, though doomed to banishment without the companionship Satan was privileged to enjoy. Again and again, with poignant insistence, the monster tells Frankenstein, "Remember, that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed . . . I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous." (p. 100) The reader is never allowed to forget that the initial wrong was Frankenstein's in banishing the monster from love and participation in the human family.

In this middle section, Mary Shelley reveals her indebtedness to Wordsworth. In Chapter 18, in a description of the blissful interlude during which Frankenstein and his friend Clerval journeyed together down the Rhine on their way to Holland and England, a section from Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" has been inserted to characterize Clerval's joyous reveling in the natural landscape. Here, of course, is the ideal occasion to introduce the complete version of the poem, not only as a corollary to this episode but as a profound expression of the Romantic philosophy of nature which informs the entire novel. Clerval, like the young Wordsworth, is described as "a being formed in the 'very poetry of nature'" and with a soul that "overflowed with ardent affections." And Frankenstein as shown here is analogous to the elder Wordsworth following his return visit to Tintern Abbey with his sister Dorothy, treasuring the memory of a time made "more dear" for having been shared with a friend so keenly receptive to natural beauty and feeling. A similar experience is depicted in Chapter 6—a two-week ramble with Clerval in the environs of Ingolstadt during which Frankenstein became again, in his words, "the

same happy creature who, a few years ago, loved and beloved by all, had no sorrow or care. When happy, inanimate nature had the power of bestowing on me the most delightful sensations.” (p. 70)

Throughout the novel, landscape defines the polarities of Frankenstein’s personality. During his brief periods of “peaceful happiness,” of feeling in harmony with himself and the world, Frankenstein dwells amid placid and verdant landscapes dotted with inviting human habitations. But during the years he labors to create the monster, seasons come and go without his taking time to “watch the blossom or the expanding leaves” (p. 56); he confesses “the fall of a leaf startled me . . .” (p. 56) When meeting with or pursuing the monster, Frankenstein climbs to icy summits or journeys by dog-sled through “wild and mysterious” Arctic wastes. And when creating the monster’s mate, he chooses for his workplace a singularly miserable hovel on one of the most remote, rocky, and barren islands of the Orkneys. The implication is clear: one “who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow” and who permits “the pursuit of knowledge . . . to interfere with the tranquillity of his domestic affections” inevitably pays the terrible personal price of alienation from both nature and humanity.

Segment three, though brief, raises provocative—and deeply disturbing—questions about human actions and aspirations. Is it truly better, as Frankenstein tells Walton, to “seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition” or to aspire to Promethean heights, as Frankenstein has sought? On this issue Frankenstein is clearly equivocal, especially when speculating that others may succeed where he has failed and charging Walton and his mutinous sailors, who are threatened by crushing ice and snow, to “return, as heroes who have fought and conquered, and who know not what it is to turn their backs on the foe.” (p. 215) That he dies with “a gentle smile” on his lips suggests he is not altogether discontent with the painful destiny he has been assigned. Other questions are equally challenging. Is intense ambition, which leads men to climb mountains, cross oceans, and discover the secret of the DNA, an inevitable passport to isolation and separation from ordinary people? Does the acquisition of knowledge, as the monster so eloquently testifies in Chapter 15 (p.

131) and the dying Frankenstein tells Walton, result only in the embittering awareness of the wretchedness and pathos of the human condition? If so, are we to conclude that ignorance and conformity are preferable? And if, as Frankenstein asserts, the monster is his “own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave to destroy all that was dear to me . . .,” what monstrous alter-ego might also lurk within us all? Most disturbing of all, if Frankenstein, as he describes himself in these last chapters, is also a fallen Adam and Lucifer, like the monster he has created, what is the novel implying about the relationship between us and God? As M. K. Joseph notes, “The implications of Mary Shelley’s ‘ghost-story’ go much further than she or any of her circle seem to have understood. . . .” (pp. xi–xii)

As a class reads and studies *Frankenstein*, many portions demand to be read aloud, for example the scene of the monster’s first awakening, the monster’s confrontation with Frankenstein at William’s gravesite, and the lament of the creature over his creator’s bedside. Charged with writing a ghost story for the delight of her friends, Mary Shelley wrote her tale to be told, to be spoken aloud, to be heard. But besides being a richly rewarding study in itself, the story also opens avenues to learning in any number of directions, as time and teacher inclination permit. For here is a story that stirs the imaginative mind to emulation, the curious to research, and the thoughtful to analysis and philosophic speculation. For example, students enjoy being offered a broad spectrum of topics for writing and research, such as the following, with the option to choose what seizes their fancy.

Stretching the Imagination:

1. Try your hand at writing a ghost or monster story, one with credible characters and intriguing settings. Tape-record your story to be played to the class on a fittingly dreary afternoon.
2. Write a sequel to the novel—either a continuation of Walton’s or the monster’s story. You might follow the monster to the North Pole, to the place of his self-immolation. In the novel he promises to kill himself, but can we be absolutely sure he fulfills his promise? And has Walton “learned his lesson”? Or, instead, has he aspired too high to turn back?
3. Frankenstein chooses not to create a bride for the monster, but the media have insisted on speculat-

ing about the effect of wife and family on Frankenstein's character; hence films like *Bride of Frankenstein*, *Son of Frankenstein*, and so forth. Write your own account of the monster united with a mate. Would the two retreat into isolation, as the monster avowed, or, as Frankenstein feared, spawn a hateful and vindictive race to threaten and overwhelm mankind?

4. Write "The Ballad of Dr. Frankenstein" in the style of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Cast Walton in the role of the Wedding Guest. Use the ballad stanza form.

Analytical Writing:

1. "Mary's Monster" is far more complex and philosophically interesting than the grotesque portrayed in the movies. Contrast the public conception of the monster with the multi-faceted creature portrayed in the novel, not failing to illuminate the monster as an inextricable part of Frankenstein himself.
2. Trace the multiple levels of Dr. Frankenstein's characterization: the family man, the scientist, the Promethean/Faustian figure, the "Ancient Mariner," the fallen angel. What final judgment are we intended to make of this man? What makes him noble in spite of his suffering, failures, and ultimate defeat?
3. Analyze Walton's character and functions in the novel, noting analogies to Coleridge's Wedding Guest and Dr. Frankenstein himself. Describe Walton's past history, his reasons for journeying to the North Pole, and the emotional and psychological states of mind he depicts in his four letters to his sister. Trace his relationship with Dr. Frankenstein from the time he rescues him from the ice floe until his death on the ice-bound ship. What does Walton learn from this extended and most memorable encounter? Has he been "saved" in time by the obsessed scientist, or is he destined to suffer a comparable fate?
4. Discuss *Frankenstein* as a document of social criticism, paying special attention to what it is saying about human preoccupation with appearances, the moral implications of scientific experimentation, "man's inhumanity to man," and conditions for a balanced and harmonious life.
5. Discuss the relevance of this novel to contemporary life. What does a novel written more than a century and a half ago have to say to people living in the 1980s? How does *Frankenstein* go far beyond being the simple "ghost story" that Byron, on that memorable night in 1819 in Geneva, asked each of his guests to write?
6. Explain the subtitle of the novel—"A Modern Prometheus"—discussing the various applications of the Greek myth to the novel's characters and

themes. (You may want to take into consideration Byron's and Shelley's treatment of the Prometheus myth as well.)

7. To what extent can it be said that Frankenstein and the monster symbolize the best and worst in each other as well as the essential duality of man's nature? (A large share of the public even believes "Frankenstein" to be the name of the monster.) Can you think of other works of literature which similarly portray the double nature of people, a mixture of both good and evil?—Consider the monster as a kind of *doppelgänger*, an infernal double.

Research Topics for the Intellectually Curious:

1. Following research, present an analysis of the influence of *one* of the following on the novel—Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Godwin, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth.
2. Biographers have noted that Mary Shelley was almost a reincarnation of her deceased mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, in personality, talent, and rebelliousness. Explore Mary Shelley's rich inheritance from the mother she never knew. To what extent and in what ways did she reveal herself as her mother's daughter? And, judging from recent critical commentary, how are Mary Shelley's feelings about the death of her mother and the death of her infants woven into the fabric of the novel?
3. Investigate the remarkable friendship of Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, with particular attention to the "spill-over" benefits to Mary Shelley and the impact of this relationship on her novel. To what extent is her book a consequence of a three-way friendship among these individuals?
4. Trace the evolution of the Frankenstein myth as it has been changed and developed through drama and mass media. Pay particular attention to various film versions of the story, both serious and comic. (See Martin Tropp, *Mary Shelley's Monster*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.)
5. The fictional relationship of Frankenstein and Clerval during their extended walking tours and travels is highly analogous to that of William and Dorothy Wordsworth in real life. Describe Wordsworth's very special relationship with his sister. Explain in what ways it could be said to be comparable to the relationship between Frankenstein and Clerval.
6. Select one of Mary Shelley's other novels for reading and study (most recommended, *The Last Man*). Find out what the critics have to say about this book. Explain how this novel compares in themes and style with *Frankenstein*.
7. Investigate current developments in the field of biologic and genetic engineering. Present what you consider to be both positive and negative

aspects of this research. What moral issues still need to be resolved as scientists push ahead in this area?

As these topics suggest, *Frankenstein* is a mine of ideas for writing, speaking, and research. It has given the world Dr. Frankenstein and his monster, characters who occupy a permanent place in folk

memory and the public imagination. Surely the novel from which they derive merits inclusion in the high school curriculum as well.

Gladys V. Veidemanis teaches at North High School, Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

Still Learning My Colors at 33 (for Tye)

I first knew chartreuse when Alice, whose
man drums for a rock and roll band,
asked me to bring her something chartreuse to wear
from San Francisco. I had to admit
I wasn't even sure what it looked like,
though I liked the sound of the word.
". . . sort of like lemon-lime, not lime green,"
she said, "not yellow . . . something in between.
You'll know when you see it. There's nothing like it."

I didn't like the idea; this
yellow-green had me thinking of
fingernails on a blackboard.
I thought Alice a little crazy,
had visions of her painting her
fingernails chartreuse,
maybe even wearing chartreuse tights,
lit by blacklights, between
dances, sipping her liqueur
tasting miraculously of the same color.

And yesterday, standing before the waterfall
you showed me moss
brushed with a light
quick stroke to amaze
(there's nothing like it),
chartreuse in the flood of day's true
light and water
falling to nurture
chartreuse on the rocks.

Gerry Foote
Lincoln High School
Portland, Oregon
