



***READING AND WRITING SKILLS FOR STUDENTS OF
LITERATURE IN ENGLISH: ROMANTICISM***

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2.2. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818 edition)

Reading Skills

I

Volume 1

Letters 1-4

1. Where does the novel take place in the opening section? Is it significant?
2. Who is Robert Walton?
3. Who are the letters addressed to?
4. What are Robert Walton's intentions and what is his ultimate aim? What implications can be traced behind them?
5. What does he miss?
6. What does he see in Letter IV?
7. "He was not, as the other traveller seemed to be, a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island, but an European". Identify the passage and discuss the implications behind Walton's words from a postcolonial perspective.
8. How does Walton feel towards Victor Frankenstein?
9. What do Walton and Frankenstein have in common?

Chapter 1

1. Where is Victor Frankenstein from?
2. Who is Elizabeth Lavenza?
3. Who are the remaining members of the Frankenstein household?
4. Who is Henry Clerval?
5. What is Frankenstein passionate about from a young age? Which authors does he read?
6. What is natural philosophy contrasted with in the text?
7. What invention does Frankenstein decide to consecrate his strength to? Why?
8. Name an event in this chapter that makes an impression on Frankenstein.

Chapter 2

1. What event shakes the calm in the Frankenstein household?
2. Where does Victor attend university? What is he yearning to acquire?
3. Is Victor disappointed by what he encounters at university? Which trait of his personality is made visible?
4. What effect does M. Waldman have on Frankenstein?

Chapter 3

1. What becomes Frankenstein's main concern in Ingolstadt? Which fields does he concentrate on studying?

2. What does Frankenstein discover? What does he decide to do with his knowledge?
3. Illustrate the process of assemblage of Frankenstein's "workshop of filthy creation".
4. Which physical traits of the creature are provided?
5. Discuss the reasoning on knowledge that appears at the end of the chapter. Which of the implied views do you agree with?
6. On the whole, what is Victor's social life at university like?

Chapter 4

1. Describe Frankenstein's creation and comment on the Gothic elements that can be traced in the opening paragraphs.
2. What does Frankenstein do once the creature comes to life? What is the creature's first reaction?
3. Who does Frankenstein meet when he flees from the creature?
4. What are Clerval's plans in Ingolstadt?
5. What happens to Frankenstein and who takes care of him?

Chapter 5

1. Who is Justine Moritz?

Chapter 6

1. What piece of news does Alphonse Frankenstein transmit to Victor in his letter? What does Victor decide to do?
2. Why does Victor spend the night at Secheron?
3. Read the paragraphs describing Frankenstein's experience of the storm and discuss the presence of elements belonging to the Gothic tradition.
4. Who does Frankenstein see at Plainpalais?
5. Who is William's murderer?
6. Why does Frankenstein decide not to tell his story?
7. Who is accused of William's death? Why?

Chapter 7

1. Why does Justine admit to having killed William? What kind of view of the church does this fact convey?
2. What is Justine's fate?
3. How does Frankenstein feel about the outcome of events? Why does he keep silent?

Volume 2

Chapters 1 & 2

1. What seems to be the prize received for devoting one's life to science?
2. What do the Frankensteins do after the death of Justine?
3. In what way/s is the change of scenery significant?

4. Give examples of the descriptions of nature found in the text and explain their significance, bearing in mind the cultural context the text belongs to.
5. Where does Victor come across the creature? Look at the passage where this event takes place and explain its significance, bearing in mind the cultural context the text belongs to.
6. What is the creature's attitude towards Frankenstein? What does he ask of his creator?
7. Which Biblical characters does the creature compare himself with?
8. What do the creature's words in chapter II highlight?

Chapters 3 & 4

1. What are the creature's first experiences after being created?
2. Why does he end up in hiding and where does he decide to conceal himself?
3. Who are the inhabitants of the cottage the creature discovers? What does he find out about their circumstances?
4. Which "godlike science" does the creature discover and what is his reaction?
5. What is the creature's plan in order to be accepted by the cottagers?

Chapter 5

1. Who arrives at the cottage?
2. How does the creature start learning the use of language?
3. Which book does Felix use to instruct Safie? How does the creature take advantage of it and what is the main source of knowledge he extracts from the text? From a 21st-century perspective, what is the significance of such a fact?
4. "While I listened to the instructions which Felix bestowed upon the Arabian, the strange system of human society was explained to me. I heard of the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty; of rank, descent, and noble blood". In what way/s are these lines relevant from a political and social perspective and what do they highlight?
5. "I learned that the possessions most esteemed by your fellow-creatures were, high and unsullied descent united with riches. A man might be respected with only one of these acquisitions; but without either he was considered, except in very rare instances, as a vagabond and a slave, doomed to waste his powers for the profit of the chosen few. And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was, besides, endowed with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; ... Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?" In what way/s are these lines relevant from a political and social perspective and what do they highlight?
6. What does the creature learn at the end of the chapter and what is his reaction?

Chapter 6

1. What is the cottagers' surname and what is their story?
2. What other skill, apart from speaking, has the creature learned?
3. In this chapter we learn that Safie's mother, "a Christian Arab", "instructed her daughter in the tenets of her religion, and taught her to aspire to higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit, forbidden to the female followers of Mahomet". Later on, it is added that: "The prospect of marrying a Christian, and remaining in a country where women were allowed to take a rank in society, was enchanting to her [Safie]". Comment on these lines from the perspective of gender. What is relevant about them?
4. Bearing in mind the representation of Safie's father as a "treacherous Turk", what view of the East does the novel appear to put forward?

Chapter 7

1. What does the creature learn from the story of the cottagers?
2. Which books does the creature come across?
3. What learnings does he extract from them?
4. Which book in particular has the deepest impact on him and why?
5. Again, which Biblical characters (via Milton) does the creature compare himself with? Which religion might this view convey?
6. What other non-fictional piece of writing does the creature come across? Explain its significance.
7. What are the creature's intentions towards the cottagers? What does he expect from them?
8. What effect does the acquisition of knowledge have on the creature?
9. Which plan of action does the creature undertake in order to be accepted by the De Lacey's?
10. "[T]he hearts of men, when unprejudiced by any obvious self-interest, are full of brotherly love and charity". What is the irony of these words, uttered by the old De Lacey?
11. What is the cottagers' reaction at seeing the creature?

Chapters 8 & 9

1. What effect does the cottagers' reaction have on the creature? What does he decide to do?
2. Which event confirms his desires of revenge?
3. Once he reaches the environs of Geneva, who does he come across and what is the outcome of the encounter? What does he do to Justine?
4. What does the creature ask Frankenstein to do for him? What does he threaten to do if Victor does not comply with his wishes?
5. What does Frankenstein decide to do?

Volume 3

Chapter 1

1. What are Alphonse Frankenstein's plans towards Victor and Elizabeth?
2. Why does Victor need to go to England?
3. What are the main stops in the tour Victor plans? Who will accompany him and for how long?
4. "Elizabeth approved of the reasons of my departure, and only regretted that she had not the same opportunities of enlarging her experience, and cultivating her understanding". What do these lines suggest? In what way/s are they representative for a feminist reading of the novel?
5. Look for descriptions of nature in the chapter and relate them to the cultural context in which the text appeared.
6. Towards the end of the chapter, a premonitory paragraph suggests the death of Clerval. What other implications can be found in the paragraph?

Chapter 2

1. What does Victor see in Clerval?
2. When do they leave London? Why? Where do they go next?
3. While in Oxford, there is a reference to Charles I and to the "most animating epoch of English history". Find out about the monarch and about his times. Why do you think Shelley speaks in such terms of them?
4. Why does Victor part with Clerval? Where does he go afterwards and why? Describe the place he settles in and relate it to the cultural context in which the text appeared.
5. Describe the difference between Victor's first and second experiments.

Chapter 3

1. Who does Frankenstein come across when he is working on his second experiment?
2. Why does Victor destroy the second creature?
3. Analyse the master/slave dichotomy that is created through the relationship between Frankenstein and the creature.
4. What is the creature's threat to Frankenstein?
5. Why does Clerval write to Victor?
6. What does Victor plan to do with the remains of the second creature?
7. What happens to Victor when he gets rid of the creature?
8. Where does Frankenstein appear?
9. Why is he arrested?

Chapter 4

1. What is the identity of the gentleman found dead?
2. Who comes to pick up Victor?
3. What's the result of the trial?
4. How do they return to England?

Chapter 5

1. Why does Frankenstein hide the reason for his altered state?
2. What route do they follow in their return to Switzerland?
3. When does Frankenstein promise to tell Elizabeth his secret?
4. When is the marriage arranged for?
5. Where will Victor and Elizabeth reside, once married?
6. Where do Victor and Elizabeth go after the ceremony takes place?
7. How is Elizabeth feeling while on the boat?

Chapter 6

1. Describe the weather at the beginning of the chapter. What is it an example of?
2. Who does the creature murder at the opening of the chapter?
3. How does Frankenstein return to Geneva?
4. How does Alphonse Frankenstein react to the news?
5. What happens to Victor?
6. What does he determine to do, once healed?
7. Who does he visit?
8. Where does Victor think the creature might be?

Chapter 7

1. What does Frankenstein decide at the beginning of the chapter?
2. What does the creature tell Victor at the cemetery?
3. Where does Frankenstein pursue the creature?
4. How does Frankenstein keep track of the creature?
5. Where does the creature lead Frankenstein?
6. Give examples of the descriptions of nature to be found in this chapter and relate them to the cultural context in which the text appeared.
7. What happens when Frankenstein is about to die in the frozen waters?
8. What is significant about the fact that the boat is heading north?
9. What does Frankenstein ask of Walton?

Letters

1. What change of point of view takes place here?
2. Does Walton believe Frankenstein's tale? Why/why not?
3. How does Walton feel towards Frankenstein?
4. How does Frankenstein see himself and his activities when younger?
5. What is the situation of the boat?
6. What is Walton scared of?
7. How does Frankenstein address the sailors? What is relevant in his words about Walton and himself?
8. What does Walton decide to do?
9. How does Frankenstein regard his past life? Is there a change in his attitude?

10. "Farewell, Walton! Seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed". Explain the significance of these words, bearing in mind the whole text.
11. How does the creature react at Frankenstein's death?
12. How does Walton react on meeting the creature?
13. What is the creature's version of the story? How does he feel at the end of the novel?
14. What are the creature's intentions?

II

1. To what particular literary tradition/s does *Frankenstein* belong?
2. Find examples of the Gothic and of Romanticism in the text.
3. Read appendix B in the Oxford edition of the novel (Ed. Marilyn Butler) and find out about the main changes between the 1818 and the 1831 editions of the text.
4. What do you know about the origins of the novel? Find out about its genesis.
5. The title of Mary Shelley's novel is *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*. Find out about the figure of Prometheus. Why do you think Shelley names him in the title and what is the significance of doing so?
6. Read the lines from *Paradise Lost* that appear below the title and find out about John Milton's work. In the light of the previous question, what is the meaning of the lines and why are they relevant to an understanding of *Frankenstein*?
7. What is the function of the letters that open and close the story? In what way/s can they be understood?
8. How many narrative voices can be pointed out in the text? Discuss their significance and the order in which they appear.
9. The creature is given a central voice in the text. Why is that and in what way/s can this fact be interpreted?
10. In what way/s can the creature be interpreted?
11. Discuss the significance of the use of the city of Geneva in the novel.
12. Find out about the figure of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In what way was he related to the city of Geneva?
13. In what way/s can Rousseau's myth of the 'noble savage' be related to *Frankenstein*?
14. What view of society does the novel present the reader with?
15. What view of science, knowledge, language and education does the novel present the reader with?
16. "I see by your eagerness, and the wonder and hope which your eyes express, my friend, that you expect to be informed of the secret with which I am acquainted; that cannot be: listen patiently until the end of my story, and you will easily perceive why I am reserved upon that subject. I will not lead you on, unguarded and ardent as I then was, to your destruction and infallible misery. Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the

world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow". Discuss the description of the consequences of knowledge present in the above lines. What does the excerpt show about Victor Frankenstein? Why might Shelley have such a conception?

17. "The republican institutions of our country have produced simpler and happier manners than those which prevail in the great monarchies that surround it. Hence there is less distinction between the several classes of its inhabitants; and the lower orders being neither so poor nor so despised, their manners are more refined and moral. A servant in Geneva does not mean the same thing as a servant in France and England. Justine, thus received in our family, learned the duties of a servant; a condition which, in our fortunate country, does not include the idea of ignorance, and a sacrifice of the dignity of a human being". Comment on the political and class implications of the above quote.
18. After familiarising yourself with the main characteristics of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, discuss the way/s in which *Frankenstein* might be effecting a critique of the main tenets of these movements.
19. The relationship between Frankenstein and the creature has been interpreted as reproducing some of the events that took place in the French Revolution. Can you recognise any?
20. Could the novel be read as a reflection on parenting?
21. Could the novel be read from a religious perspective? And from an anti-religious one?
22. In what other way/s can *Frankenstein* be read? Try to think of different approaches from the perspective of contemporary critical theory.
23. Could Frankenstein be read from the perspective of marginalised voices? Could the novel be defined as a feminist/gay/lesbian/queer/racial 'other'/working class text?

Writing Skills

1. "*Frankenstein* thus rejects the most fundamental myths of the Enlightenment, the notion that scientific and economic progress will continually improve the condition of humankind, the idea that once the barriers to knowledge are pushed aside, the conditions for perpetual peace and a universal harmony will have been established". (Warren Montag, "'The Workshop of Filthy Creation': A Marxist Reading of *Frankenstein*". *Frankenstein*. By Mary Shelley. Ed. Johanna M. Smith. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1992. p. 306-307). Would you agree with the above reading of *Frankenstein*? Why/why not? Illustrate your answer by close reference to the text.
2. "The monster in its turn is not so much the creation that Frankenstein constantly calls it, as a product, the product of reason". (Warren Montag, "'The Workshop of Filthy Creation': A Marxist Reading of *Frankenstein*". *Frankenstein*. By Mary Shelley. Ed. Johanna M. Smith. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1992. p. 307). Comment on the above quote in relation to Shelley's text.

3. In his Marxist reading of Shelley's novel, Warren Montag establishes that "Frankenstein seems to center on the emergence of the industrial working class as a political and social force, seen in the light of the French and perhaps even British revolutions". (Warren Montag, "The Workshop of Filthy Creation': A Marxist Reading of *Frankenstein*". *Frankenstein*. By Mary Shelley. Ed. Johanna M. Smith. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1992. p. 304-305). Analyse the above quote in the light of Shelley's text and of the context in which it appeared.
4. "The structured representation of social inequality, or rather inequalities, is one of the great themes of fiction and non-fiction of the French Revolutionary period. In women's writing perhaps especially, prejudice's many forms are characteristically considered together, as symptoms of an ethical and cultural crisis, not as an issue of either class or gender alone". (Marilyn Butler, "Introduction". *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 (1994). p. xlv). In what way/s can Butler's words be understood? How does Shelley convey the depiction of "social inequality" in her text? Would the second part of the quote be applicable to *Frankenstein*?
5. According to Gilbert and Gubar, Mary Shelley, in *Frankenstein*, "formulated her anxieties about femaleness". (Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000 (1979). p. 221). In the light of the above quote, in what way/s may the novel be understood as an expression of female unease in the early 19th-century?
6. "[T]he monster's physical ugliness represents his social illegitimacy, his bastardy, his namelessness. ... Indeed, in his vile illegitimacy he seems to incarnate that bestial 'unnameable' place. And significantly, he is himself as nameless as a woman is in patriarchal society". (Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000 (1979). p. 241). Analyse the above lines in the light of Shelley's novel.
7. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar state that "women have seen themselves (because they have been seen) as monstrous, vile, degraded creatures, second-comers, and emblems of filthy materiality, even though they have also been traditionally defined as superior spiritual beings, angels, better halves". Following this, they conclude by arguing that "Mary Shelley's conscious or unconscious awareness of the monster woman implicit in the angel woman" appears in the text. (Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000 (1979). p. 240). Would you agree with the above dual representation of women? How is this conveyed in the text?
8. "Shelley had attempted to come to terms with the making of the colonial subject. Sympathetic yet monstrous, clandestinely reared on sacred and profane histories of salvation and empire, shunned by the civilisation which produced his subjectivity, this creature's destructive rage propels him out of the novel into an indefinite future. But what of his history? The

feminist dimension of the novel provides a frame that is critical of the effort to construct a creature without womb-life and infancy. But when it comes to the colonial subject's pre-history, Shelley's political imagination fails". (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism". *Frankenstein*. By Mary Shelley. Ed. Fred Botting. London: Macmillan, 1995. p. 253-54). Would you agree with Spivak's views as expressed above? Argue your case.

9. "[T]here is a framing woman in the book who is neither tangential, nor encircled, nor yet encircling. ... Margaret Saville does not respond to close the text as frame. The frame is thus simultaneously not a frame, and the monster can step "beyond the text" and be "lost in darkness". Within the allegory of our reading, the place of both the English lady and the unnameable monster are left open by this great flawed text. It is satisfying for a post-colonial reader to consider this a noble resolution for a nineteenth-century English novel". (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism". *Frankenstein*. By Mary Shelley. Ed. Fred Botting. London: Macmillan, 1995. p. 254-55). Analyse the above quote in the light of the different frames present in Shelley's text. Then, discuss both Saville's and the monster's "open" positioning. Why is the text "flawed", according to Spivak, and how can the last sentence be interpreted?