

## Introduction to *Frankenstein*

### Advanced Placement Literature and Composition

In order to fully comprehend, analyze and write well-supported, coherent, in depth analysis essays about Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein, The Modern Prometheus* you are required to attain the following background knowledge.

- I. Briefly read the article "Frankenstein, Meet Your Forefathers":  
[http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured\\_articles/20061027friday.html](http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured_articles/20061027friday.html)

Answer these questions based on the article, "Frankenstein, Meet Your Forefathers".

1. Under what circumstances was the story "Frankenstein" written?
2. Where did the Frankenstein myth originate?
3. What happens when electricity is pumped into the human body?\*
4. How did the work of the scientists mentioned in the article affect modern medicine?\*
5. What proof does Susan Stewart offer for Frankenstein's popularity today?

\*For further reading and information on electricity and science:

<http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Contexts/electric.html>

<http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Gifs/galvlab.html>

<http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Contexts/alchemy.html>

**See the summary I have provided below (pages 3 – 6):**

**II. Research, identify and list the major elements of Romantic AND Gothic literature. Compare/contrast Romanticism and Gothicism. Create a double-bubble or Venn- diagram.**

**Why is *Frankenstein, The Modern Prometheus* considered both a Romantic and Gothic novel?**

**III. Explain and identify examples of how the Romantics railed against the Enlightenment.**

**IV. Identify the Romantic concept of *Tabula Rasa* (clean slate) and its connection to *Frankenstein*.** [www.u.arizona.edu/~atinkham/Rousseau.html](http://www.u.arizona.edu/~atinkham/Rousseau.html)

**V. Define frame narratives and epistolary written style novels.** How can Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* be compared to Russian nesting dolls? How are framed narratives employed in the novel?

<http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/narrative/v018/18.3.benford.pdf>

VI. Allusions give clues to the theme of a novel and provide insight into a few of its primary ideas. **In the novel, *Frankenstein*, there are multiple allusions:** Some are biblical, others are based on Greek mythology, others are based on epic poetry, and others are based on nature and culture.

One allusion refers to Dr. Victor Frankenstein as the Almighty Creator. Another compares Dr. Victor Frankenstein to Prometheus, the Creator in Greek mythology. Another alludes to the monster, Frankenstein as molded clay; Adam, and Eve, etc. Major works which are alluded to in *Frankenstein* are:

- *Paradise Lost*
- "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"
- Greek myth of "Prometheus"
- The Bible, Genesis 1 - 3

**Research, read and acquire a background about these allusions. Take notes:**

Here are a few cites to enrich your background knowledge. Click within each cite for further readings and **my guided questions and citations (see a. b. c. below).**

<http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Articles/goldberg.html>

<http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/contents.html>

a. Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein* has a subtitle; *The Modern Prometheus*. **What is its meaning? Research and interpret its meaning.**

<http://www.theoi.com/Titan/TitanPrometheus.html>

b. The influence of John Milton's poem, *Paradise Lost*, runs rampant throughout the entire corpus of Shelley's novel, through both direct reference, as well as simply **sharing common threads. Identify its influence on Shelley's, *Frankenstein*. Briefly familiarize yourself with Book I from *Paradise Lost***: learn how Lucifer is expelled from Heaven and Adam and from Eden when they challenge their creator.

<http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Milton/pl0.html>

[http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading\\_room/pl/book\\_1/index.shtml](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/pl/book_1/index.shtml)

**Note: These questions will be alluded to in *Frankenstein*:**

1. What is the relationship between God and Adam? Between God and Lucifer?
2. How and why does this relationship change?
3. What does Milton suggest about the duty of a parent/creator to his creation in these excerpts?

<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwartz/hist257s02/students/Becky/paradise.html>

<http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Contexts/pl.html>

<http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Milton/pl1.html>

c. **Read and explicate the poem, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Explain why Mary Shelley identified this poem as the greatest influence on her novel.**

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173253>

[http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.html](http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/The_Rime_of_the_Ancient_Mariner.html)

VII. While doing a close read and annotating Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, use this informative cite to guide you in the allusions in each chapter of the book:

<http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Themes/index.html>

### **Life and Times of Mary Shelley**

Mary Shelley was born Mary Wollstoncraft in 1797 to William Godwin and Mary Wollstoncraft—both very prominent and liberal writers. Her mother had written *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman*, which was a very popular feminist work. Mary spent much of her teen years writing stories in Scotland until she returned to London at age 16. She met and fell in love with Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and became pregnant. The two continued their affair until his estranged wife committed suicide, at which point they married. They lost all three of their children, and in 1822 Percy drowned in the Gulf of Spezia in Italy. At the age of 24, she was an impoverished widow, and she supported herself with her writing.

*Frankenstein* was published in 1818 when she was only 20 years old. It is considered a huge feminist feat because it was written by the female child of a world-renowned early feminist. However, there are very few female characters, and other than Safie (the wife of one of “the cottagers”) they are not particularly strong female roles.

### **Historical Events:**

—1789: the start of the French revolution (an attempt of the French people to rid themselves of their absolute monarchy). British liberals were excited that the common people were standing up to their oppressors, but they quickly became disillusioned when the revolution became very bloody and its leaders became tyrants themselves.

—1793 through 1794: the French Reign of Terror under Robespierre. British liberals lost all hope for true justice and equality in that year.

—1804: Napoleon is crowned Emperor. During this whole time, Romantic writers were turning towards nature as an escape from the harsh realities of their world. Nature was someplace where human tyranny did not reign.

## Romantic Movement

—The Romantics were, for the most part, disheartened liberals.

—They sought solitude in nature, believing that the key to all emotional healing could be found in nature. Nature imagery is the most predominant feature of Romantic literature.

“The weather was fine: it was about the middle of August...The weight upon my spirit was sensibly lightened as I plunged into the precipices that overhung me on every side—the sound of the river raging among the rocks, and the dashing of the waterfalls around, spoke of a power mighty as Omnipotence—and I ceased to fear, or to bend before any less almighty than that which had created and ruled the elements...” .

—The idea of the disenfranchised man was also very common. Such men, who found themselves unable to live in society, were often revered and/or sympathized with. Frankenstein and his creature are both disenfranchised men—the creature because his form keeps him from any human company, and Frankenstein because he eventually feels that he cannot enjoy the company of his fellow men after unleashing a monster among them.

—Many Romantics (like Coleridge and both Shelleys) dealt with the supernatural. One common Romantic trait was making ordinary, everyday things seem wonderful and awe-inspiring. However, some went a step further and dealt with non-natural things. Frankenstein’s creature (and his education/life) is not a common thing. It could not possibly be a real thing. Up until the Romantic era, writers wrote fiction that read as though it could possibly be real—and was often taken for truth. *Frankenstein* cannot be misconstrued as real.

## Gothic Literature

—It was an offshoot of Romantic literature.

—Gothic literature was the predecessor of modern horror movies in both theme and style.

—Gothic literature put a spin on the Romantic idea of nature worship and nature imagery.

Along with nature having the power of healing, Gothic writers gave nature the power of destruction. *Frankenstein* is full of the harsh reality of nature. Many storms arise in the book, including storms the night the creature comes to life and the night Frankenstein destroys the corpse of the second creature in the Irish Sea.

—The most common feature of Gothic literature is the indication of mood through the weather. When bad things are going to happen in a Gothic novel, the reader knows it because there is inevitably a storm outside. This is still true in many books and films. (When Frankenstein is about to encounter his creature in the mountains):

“I quitted my seat and walked on, although the darkness and storm increased every minute and the thunder burst with a terrific crash over my head. It was echoed from

Saleve, the Juras, and the Alps of Savoy; vivid flashes of lightning dazzled my eyes, illuminating the lake, making it appear like a vast sheet of fire...I perceived in the gloom a figure which stole from behind a clump of trees near me; I stood fixed, gazing intently...A flash of lightning illuminated the object, and discovered its shape plainly to me; it's gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity...".

### **Victor Frankenstein's "Science"**

Modern readers are often puzzled by Victor's approach to discovering the "elixir of life" in that he does not seem to perform scientific experiments as much as read books. Prior to the eighteenth century, what we call "science" and what we call "philosophy" were essentially the same disciplines. The study of nature and the desire to know how nature functions eventually came to be called "natural philosophy," but the quest for such knowledge was still more what we would consider philosophical than scientific. Mary Shelley indicates that Victor is a student of this "natural philosophy" when she indicates who some of Victor's early influences were. While admitting that many of these men's theories had been discredited, Victor still admits that it was they who largely set him on the course he was eventually to take.

**Cornelius Agrippa** was a Renaissance philosopher and scientist whose works reflect a strong interest in the occult and ancient, mystical "sciences" of the near East. His writing blends European interpretations of Plato's philosophy with Jewish Kabbalistic beliefs. His famous work "De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum" (the vanity and uncertainty of the arts and sciences), published in 1527, is a treatise on the occult, as a hidden, knowledge that existed in Renaissance Europe and was known to a select few. It is a collection of thoughts on Renaissance magic including such diverse topics as astrology and the effect of planetary motion on human events, occult virtues, the natural tendency of certain "elements" to work harmoniously together and others to oppose one another, spells, methods of predicting the future, numerology, the divine Trinity, the Kabbalistic Names of God and the orders of evil spirits.

In terms of "real science," his ideas have all but been discredited by later thinkers and by the processes of observation and experimentation.

**Paracelsus** was another Renaissance philosopher and scientist who introduced a new concept of disease and the use of chemicals rather than herbs to treat diseases. Paracelsus asserted that diseases were caused by external agents attacking the body, contrary to the then-traditional idea of disease as an internal upset of the balance of the body's humors (yellow bile, black bile, blood and phlegm). To cure the disease, one needed to attack this external agent. Alchemy became the means by which the chemical remedies were prepared.

Thus, Paracelsus changed the emphasis of the alchemy from chasing the mythological "Elixir of Life" or "Philosopher's Stone," to making medicines.

Some of Paracelsus's ideas, however, bordered on the occult. He was said to have been taught the secret of the universal solvent in Constantinople. He was believed to have had such tutors as gypsies and sorcerers, and affected miraculous cures of several maladies.

**Albertus Magnus** was still another Renaissance philosopher and scientist who advocated the search into the natural causes of things apart from the church's position that God was the cause of all effects. For example, in one of his most famous works Albertus wrote: "The aim of natural science is not simply to accept the statements of others, but to investigate the causes that are at work in nature."

This was a radical idea for the time, as most scholars believed that the scriptures were the sole source of all knowledge. Not only did Albertus advocate what we would call today the scientific approach to studying the real world, but he did so in such a way that his ideas were accepted by the Church.

In a work on plants Albertus wrote, "In studying nature, we have not to inquire how God the Creator may, as He freely wills, use His creatures to work miracles and thereby show forth His power: we have rather to inquire what Nature with its immanent causes can naturally bring to pass," thus placing the emphasis on understanding how nature worked rather than on trying to understand God.

Not everyone held Albertus in high esteem, however. Roger Bacon, who was a contemporary, and in many ways a rival of Albertus, was highly critical. He wrote that Albertus, "... is a man of infinite patience and has amassed great information, but his works have four faults. The first is boundless, puerile vanity; the second in ineffable falsity; the third is superfluity of bulk; and the fourth is his ignorance of the most useful and the most beautiful parts of philosophy."

Roger Bacon was, however, an even stronger advocate of experimental science than was Albertus but did not feel compelled to reconcile his scientific theories with Church doctrine. He was also able to demonstrate a number of factual and reasoning errors in Albertus's work.