

## Discussion Questions for *Frankenstein*

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As you read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, either on your own or with a group, we invite you to use these questions to add layers to your discussion or thinking about the novel. The first section includes questions for each chapter of the novel; you will find questions reflecting on the book as a whole at the end. We have not included specific pages numbers as various editions have different page numbers, but the quotations are based on the 1831 edition of the novel.

### Discussion Questions for Each Chapter

#### Letters I through IV

1. *Frankenstein* begins and ends with letters written by Robert Walton. Why do you think that Mary Shelley chose to have him frame the novel? How would your opinions of Victor Frankenstein and his creation differ if their story was told directly by Victor Frankenstein himself? What if the story was told solely by the creation?
2. Walton yearns for a friend, much like Victor Frankenstein's creature does. What does this tell you about human nature? Is it in our nature to want companionship, someone to confide in, and someone to care for?
3. In Letter IV, Walton writes, "Yesterday the stranger said to me, "You may easily perceive, Captain Walton, that I have suffered great and unparalleled misfortunes. I had determined at one time that the memory of these evils should die with me, but you have won me to alter my determination. You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been. I do not know that the relation of my disasters will be useful to you; yet, when I reflect that you are pursuing the same course, exposing yourself to the same dangers which have rendered me what I am, I imagine that you may deduce an apt moral from my tale, one that may direct you if you succeed in your undertaking and console you in case of failure. Prepare to hear of occurrences which are usually deemed marvelous."
  - A. In the excerpt above, Victor is foreshadowing the creation of his monster and how it went quickly awry. Are there any other instances of foreshadowing in these letters?
  - B. In the excerpt above, the themes of knowledge and wisdom are introduced. Often, knowledge and wisdom are seen as interchangeable, or as going hand-in-hand, but are they necessarily the same. Pay attention to how knowledge and wisdom are portrayed in the book.
4. Walton and Frankenstein are both men of science but in vastly different fields. What does having two main characters in this field tell you about 1800s Europe? What does it tell you about the gender roles of this time?

#### Chapter One

1. This chapter introduces the women of Victor's life: his mother, Caroline, and his adopted family/betrothed, Elizabeth Lavenza. How is their family dynamic representative of other families in the 1800s?

2. Victor describes the first appearance of Elizabeth: “Her hair was the brightest living gold, and despite the poverty of her clothing, seemed to set a crown of distinction on her head. Her brow was clear and ample, her blue eyes cloudless, and her lips and the moulding of her face so expressive of sensibility and sweetness that none could behold her without looking on her as of a distinct species, a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features.”
  - A. Elizabeth is described as being heavenly, almost angelic as a child. We know that she is destined to be married to Victor, whom we also know to be quite troubled from Walton’s letters. Because of this contrast, do you think their relationship will flourish or falter?
  - B. In what ways might Elizabeth act as a foil to Victor?
  - C. How does the representation of Elizabeth, compared to those with whom she initially lives, reveal class bias of the time period?

### Chapter Two

1. Victor describes how even as a child, “It was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn; and whether it was the outward substance of things or the inner spirit of nature and the mysterious soul of man that occupied me, still my inquiries were directed to the metaphysical, or in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world.” Even as a boy, Victor has been hungry for knowledge. He doesn’t want to learn just anything, however. He wants to figure out the “secrets of heaven.” How does this paragraph foreshadow him creating his creature in his adulthood? Is this contextual proof that he is destined to create this monster like he insists he is? If he claims that he is destined to do this, then does this negate some of the blame he may feel? Pay attention to Frankenstein’s repeated discussions of fate in the novel.
2. How does Victor’s idolization of Agrippa, Magnus, and Paracelsus in his childhood inspire him to go into science, even when he learns they are “sad trash”? If he had studied then-modern scientists, would he have ever thought of the idea to create life from nothing? As much as modern science was involved in the creation of the monster, was whimsy and a bit of alchemistic idealism to blame, as well?

### Chapter Three

1. Victor’s mother dies in this chapter of scarlet fever after nursing Elizabeth. Victor describes her death as calm but also as “that most irreparable evil.” How might the death of Victor’s mother in this chapter influence the choices he makes about his studies and later pursuits?
2. How does Victor initially choose the teachers that he will study under at Ingolstadt? What do his criteria for choosing mentors suggest about his character?

### Chapter Four

1. Victor describes the processes he goes through to learn how to create life: “To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death. I became acquainted with the science of anatomy, but this was not sufficient; I must also observe the natural decay and corruption of the human body.”
  - A. After Victor dedicates himself to the studies of life, death, and natural philosophy, he neglects his health and family. Isn’t it ironic that he is studying life and death,

but doesn't realize the costs to his own health? Why, if he is studying this subject, can't he tell that he is fading away as he is trying to animate a lifeless form? The importance of mental health was not well-known in the 1800s. How might mental health play a part in his deterioration?

- B. What does Victor's obsession suggest about the need to create a work-life balance, even in the 1800s?
2. In imagining the creation of a new race of beings, Victor imagines that "No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. Pursuing these reflections, I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption." Psychoanalytic theory in literary studies is the analysis of a character's psyche in relation to their thoughts and actions. Using this theory, what can you tell about the motivations behind Victor's experimentation and fanaticism? How might his childhood have influenced his choices?

#### Chapter Five

1. Why did Victor try to create a beautiful creature? Why was he upset when the monster ended up being grotesque when brought to life? What might this unexpected result symbolize?
2. What do you think of Victor Frankenstein's decision to run from his creation?

#### Chapter Six

1. We see another letter in this chapter, this time written by Elizabeth. What do letters do to the tone and voice of the story? How do they add to character and story development? Would you rather have heard Victor or Walton explain this chapter, or do you prefer Elizabeth's letter?
2. This chapter introduces Justine Moritz to readers. What role does she play in the story thus far? What are your predictions regarding her development and fate?

#### Chapter Seven

1. After Victor Frankenstein read his father's letter detailing young William's murder, he states, "...I felt still more gloomily. The picture appeared a vast and dim scene of evil, and I foresaw obscurely that I was destined to become the most wretched of human beings. Alas! I prophesied truly, and failed only in one single circumstance, that in all the misery I imagined and dreaded, I did not conceive the hundredth part of the anguish I was destined to endure." What does this quote reveal about Victor's personality and mindset?
2. When Justine is accused of William's murder, Victor's father says, "dry your tears. If she is, as you believe, innocent, rely on the justice of our laws, and the activity with which I shall prevent the slightest shadow of partiality." When you were making conjectures of Justine's role and fate in *Frankenstein*, did you associate her name with "justice"? Do you believe she is guilty? Why or why not?

#### Chapter Eight

1. Justine is extremely religious, even after all that has happened to her. Although she is innocent, she still confesses to the murder of William so that she will be forgiven for her sins and allowed into Heaven. How is Justine handling her misfortunes differently than

Victor? How do these two approaches to difficulty affect how we respond to their characters and situations?

2. Why doesn't Victor Frankenstein speak up and tell all he knows to try to save Justine? Is he right not to tell the story of his creation at this point? Why or why not?
3. Could Victor's paranoia and guilt be erased if he were to confess like Justine did? We don't know how religious he is, but he draws on religious terminology and references. What is the role of confession? How is his telling the story to Walton (and thus to us) a form of confession?
4. At the end of Chapter 8, Frankenstein blames himself as he watches his family mourn the deaths of William and Justine: "... torn by remorse, horror, and despair, I beheld those I loved spend vain sorrow upon the graves of William and Justine, the first hapless victims to my unhallowed arts."
  - A. Frankenstein's creation has taken two lives thus far. What are your thoughts of the creature? What would it take to change your view of it?
  - B. This quote foreshadows more deaths as a result of Victor's creation by suggesting that William and Justine are only the "first... victims." What other characters might die in *Frankenstein* to both further the plot and create tension between Victor and his creation?

#### Chapter Nine

1. Images of nature as a peaceful retreat is common in Romantic era writing and artwork. How might Shelley have been inspired by this idea when she wrote this chapter of *Frankenstein*? How is the landscape used, much like a character would be, in relation to Victor?
2. The Byronic hero is a popular archetype that developed in the Romantic period: a brooding anti-hero who is often resistant to authority figures, dangerously rebellious, and often aloof from others. In what ways does Victor Frankenstein seem to fit this literary character type? Are there other characters in *Frankenstein* who also correspond to this archetype?

#### Chapter Ten

1. Were you surprised to discover that the creature can talk—and quite eloquently? How does this original version of the monster depart from the many popular culture representations that have been created since Mary Shelley's novel?
2. In reaching out to Victor Frankenstein, the creature alludes to Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*: "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." What are the similarities between Adam and Frankenstein's creation? What are the differences? What does it tell you about the creature's personality that he holds himself to human and even Christian standards?
3. The creature pleads for sympathy from Frankenstein and claims that he was initially good: "How can I move thee? Will no entreaties cause thee to turn a favourable eye upon thy creature, who implores thy goodness and compassion? Believe me, Frankenstein, I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow creatures,

who owe me nothing? They spurn and hate me.” What do you think of the creature’s claims? Are your perceptions changing as you get more and more of the creature’s point of view?

4. Nature vs. Nurture is an important theme throughout *Frankenstein*. We begin to see it in this chapter when the creature speaks to Victor. When the creature says, “...I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity...,” we are alerted to a change in his character. He was something before and now he is different— no longer benevolent. How does this change reflect nature vs. nurture? What other characters demonstrate this concept thus far?
5. What does Victor Frankenstein owe his creature as its maker?

### Chapter Eleven

1. In this chapter, the creature recounts its first memories to Victor. Truly alone and spurned by society, it watches a family from afar in order to learn how to live. Watching them, it learns about life, family, and loneliness. How does the watching impact the creature’s feelings about Victor and human society? How does it impact the creature’s own sense of itself as an outsider?
2. Just in this first chapter of the creature’s narration, we can tell that it is an eloquent and intelligent being. The way that it speaks and its tone are similar to Victor Frankenstein’s. Why is this? Why is the point of view important? In what ways are the creature and Victor actually more similar than either would want to admit?

### Chapter Twelve

1. Frankenstein’s creature describes the misery of the DeLacey family: “They were not entirely happy. The young man and his companion often went apart and appeared to weep. I saw no cause for their unhappiness, but I was deeply affected by it.” Empathy is the ability to understand the feelings of others from their point of view, not yours. This trait is oftentimes missing in people classified as sociopaths. Is Frankenstein’s creature really a monster if it exhibits empathy? Does having empathy humanize it in some ways?
2. Frankenstein’s creature sees language as a “godlike science”: “I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers. This was indeed a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it.” Why might the creature view language in this way? How do you think Frankenstein would view language? Based on his interactions with Clerval and others, do you think Frankenstein considers language a science?
3. *Othering* describes when someone is considered different— and often lesser— than yourself and those like you. Frankenstein’s creature was othered by society, thus forcing him to go into hiding. How might its goal of learning the family’s language be connected to its status as Other? Can language have the power to change someone’s status from Other to accepted? Does language have that kind of “godlike” power?

### Chapter Thirteen

1. This chapter introduces another outsider, Safie the Arabian. Like the creature, she is also Othered. How is her status as Other different than its status? Why is there a difference between the two? What makes her more acceptable than it?

2. Like Victor Frankenstein, his creation seeks knowledge, but “sorrow only increased with knowledge. Oh, that I had for ever remained in my native wood, nor known nor felt beyond the sensations of hunger, thirst, and heat!” Why doesn’t knowledge bring the creature happiness? How are Victor and his creation similar in this way? What is the novel suggesting about knowledge?

#### Chapter Fourteen

1. In this chapter, we discover the history of the De Lacey, Felix, and Safie. Why does Shelley give us a chapter long summary of them? What should we garner from their story within a story? What would *Frankenstein* lose if this chapter were cut?
2. Frankenstein’s creature learns of social hierarchy in this chapter. How do you think this will affect it? What do you think will happen when it finds out its place in society? Being a highly intelligent, massive, humanoid creature, where do you think it fits in the hierarchy?

#### Chapter Fifteen

1. The education of the creature comes from observing the cottagers. It is watching and learning instead of experiencing. How could this be dangerous? What elements could it be missing or misinterpreting since it is not actually experiencing what it is learning, especially regarding the topics of mankind and humanity?
2. The creature learns a significant amount from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: “Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature... Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition, for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me.” Why is it dangerous that the creature read *Paradise Lost* as a true history? What if it had read other religious texts? What about strictly fictional works? What works would you have recommended to the creature for its education?
3. The creature is incredibly smart. However, everything is black or white; nothing is gray to it. It only understands the extremes of situations and hasn’t grasped the idea of being in the median. Why is it dangerous for the creature to think like this? How might this mindset separate it from society even more?
4. The creature introduces itself to the blind De Lacey and was eventually beaten by Felix upon his return. At first, the interaction was successful. The creature talked with De Lacey but did not get to say anything to Felix, who hit it repeatedly with a stick upon seeing it in the house. What do you think the repercussions of this day will be? How do you think this interaction will taint the creature’s view of humanity going forward?

#### Chapter Sixteen

1. The creature considers hurting the DeLaceys after his rejection: “I could with pleasure have destroyed the cottage and its inhabitants and have glutted myself with their shrieks and misery.” He acknowledges that he could cause people serious harm but doesn’t until he murders William. Why did the creature wait so long to kill if it had the ability and a growing inclination to do so?



2. This chapter ends in a cliff hanger: The monster alludes to a similar creature that he wants Frankenstein to make for him. Without looking ahead, how do you think Frankenstein will react? What would you say if you were Frankenstein?

### Chapter Seventeen

1. Frankenstein feels for his monster but cannot empathize with him: “His words had a strange effect upon me. I compassionated him and sometimes felt a wish to console him, but when I looked upon him, when I saw the filthy mass that moved and talked, my heart sickened and my feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred.” What does it tell you about Frankenstein’s character that he cannot empathize, but that his creature can? Why, after marveling that the creature can reason with him, can’t Frankenstein stop Othering his creature?
2. The creature demands a female companion in return for his leaving Europe. Why do you think the creature demanded a female and not a male companion? The only romantic examples he has seen are of Felix and Safie, and even then, their interactions were limited. The monster has only requested a companion, not a romantic relationship. Was this a representation of the heteronormative state of the 1800s?

### Chapter Eighteen

1. Frankenstein describes Henry Clerval as “alive to every new scene, joyful when he saw the beauties of the setting sun, and more happy when he beheld it rise and recommence a new day.” Henry Clerval and Victor Frankenstein are complete opposites. He is not scientifically inclined. He’s naturally joyful. What does Clerval add to the story? What is his purpose?

### Chapter Nineteen

1. Isolation is a common theme in *Frankenstein*. The creature is isolated because of its appearance. Victor is isolated because of his knowledge. How is this theme being furthered in this chapter? What are some other examples of isolation in the novel?
2. How does the representation of science in this chapter fit with your expectations? Is a lonely and undeveloped island a place where you would expect Victor or another scientist to be able to accomplish a scientific goal? What does Victor’s choice of place say about his goal and how he feels about it?

### Chapter Twenty

1. Frankenstein destroys his second creation out of fear of her capabilities in this chapter. He feared that she would procreate, that she would be even more malevolent than her mate, and that she would not want to leave Europe. What do you think of his recognition of this second creature as a being with her own thoughts and feelings? How does Frankenstein’s feeling fit with the time period of the novel?
2. Was Frankenstein’s destruction of the second creature justified? Why or why not?
3. The creature is furious when Frankenstein destroys his companion. Was the creature’s reaction justified? Why or why not? Did he have a right to deny the creature’s request if you feel that it is human nature to want a companion? Was this Frankenstein playing God once again?
4. The creature says to Frankenstein: “Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you

believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master; obey!” The roles of Frankenstein and his creation are reversed: the creature has become the master, and the creator has become the slave. With the creature’s newfound authority, how will the dynamics of the two change? What does it mean for the majority (Frankenstein and humans) to be afraid of the minority (the creature)?

### Chapter Twenty One

1. Throughout *Frankenstein*, Victor addresses Walton with rhetorical questions: “Why did I not die?” He does this several times when describing his emotions when he sees Clerval dead in a casket. How does this affect your reading? Does it impact your reaction to Frankenstein and his experiences? Does it remind you that it is a retelling? Does it interrupt your reading? Does it enrich your understanding of the text? Does it add another element to the story?
2. In a fever after the death of Clerval, Frankenstein imagines the creature attacking him: “Towards morning I was possessed by a kind of nightmare; I felt the fiend’s grasp in my neck and could not free myself from it; groans and cries rang in my ears.” Besides the monster actually killing Victor, what could this foreshadow or symbolize?

### Chapter Twenty Two

1. What role does Elizabeth play in the story? How does she further the plot? She is often referred to as a “passive woman” by scholars and critics because she waits for Victor the entire novel. How do you interpret this phrase? What examples from the text can you find to support this phrase?
2. Given the creature’s threat to “be with you on your wedding night,” why does Victor get married anyway? In what ways does he seem resigned to his fate at this point?

### Chapter Twenty Three

1. Did you predict that Elizabeth would actually be the victim on the wedding night? Why was Victor so sure that it would be her? What clues earlier in the novel hinted at Elizabeth as the intended victim?
2. Victor faints at the sight of Elizabeth’s body: “Life is obstinate and clings closest where it is most hated. For a moment only did I lose recollection; I fell senseless on the ground.” Fainting in Romantic and Victorian texts is often seen as a feminine trait. What is the significance of Victor fainting at the sight of the murdered Elizabeth? In what ways has he been feminized by what has happened to him?
3. After Elizabeth’s death, Victor complains that “A fiend had snatched from me every hope of future happiness; no creature had ever been so miserable as I was; so frightful an event is single in the history of man.” Victor and his creature both assert that they are the lonely ones. Victor, however, once had friends and family; the creature never did. How are Victor and his creature now alike? Since Victor is now experiencing a similar emotion as his creature, why doesn’t he feel sympathy for it? Or has the creature wronged him too many times for Victor to think this way? Is it different to have had something and lost it compared to never having had something at all?



## Chapter Twenty Four

1. This chapter brings another parallel between Frankenstein and Walton: they are both faced with demands from a third party. The creature demands that Frankenstein make a companion; Walton's crew demands they turn back for home before they all die. As we know, Frankenstein ultimately refuses while Walton obeys. Walton has many similarities to Frankenstein, but he ultimately falls short of Frankenstein's extremism. Compare and contrast their characters. What do they have in common? Where do they differ?
2. Just before dying, Frankenstein says, "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 myself have been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed." Has Frankenstein learned anything from the catastrophic outcomes of his experiments? What lesson are we to take from these equivocal last words?
3. The cat-and-mouse chase ends in this chapter with Frankenstein's death, but not at the hands of his creature. Frankenstein also dies without fulfilling his dying wish. How would the lessons you learned from this story be different if Frankenstein had killed his creation before dying? What if the creature killed him?
4. Why did the creature leave clues for Frankenstein and, in a sense, keep him alive by leaving him food and furs, if they had a mutual hatred? What did they give each other that no one else could?
5. The creature appears after Frankenstein's death and speaks to the stunned Walton, explaining that even as it killed, it desired human companionship: "[S]till I desired love and fellowship, and I was still spurned. Was there no injustice in this? Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all humankind sinned against me?" Now that you have finished the novel, who do you sympathize with? Who do you think is in the wrong?

## **Discussion Questions for After You Finish the Novel**

1. Throughout the novel, Frankenstein refers to his creation as a *dæmon*. According to the ancient Greeks, a *dæmon* is a mystical being that is neither human nor god but somewhere in between. In popular fiction, the term describes an animal that is the manifestation of a person's soul, often showcasing the person's dark side. Using these definitions, how has Victor's language influenced your perception of his creature? Has his negative language regarding his creation influenced your perception of Victor?
2. What does it mean to be a monster? Who is the real monster in *Frankenstein*? Is Victor, the well-intentioned yet troubled scientist, a monster? Or is his creation the monster? Are they both monsters in their own ways?
3. *Frankenstein* is often used as an example of ethical vs. non-ethical scientific/medical procedure. Do you think that the way that Victor created his creature was ethical? Non-ethical? Should Victor have made his creature at all? Explain.
4. What is the role of fate in the novel? Victor Frankenstein regularly bemoans that fate contributes to the outcome of his experiences. Is fate really involved, or is Victor avoiding taking the blame for his own actions? To what extent are we responsible for our own lives and actions?

5. Nature vs. Nurture is an important theme throughout *Frankenstein*. With the case of Victor's creature, he does not teach it or raise it but abandons it to figure out life on its own. If Victor had raised the creature, how do you think it would have turned out? Would it have still become a vindictive creature because it is its nature to be so? Or would it have maybe followed in Victor's footsteps to seek learning opportunities (since it is in fact quite intelligent) because Victor nurtured it that way?
6. Who is the real protagonist in *Frankenstein*? Is it Victor Frankenstein, who is also the namesake of the novel? Or is it Frankenstein's creature? Could Walton be the protagonist since the story is told through him?
7. How would the story and its meaning differ if we never got the creature's side of the story?
8. Contrary to popular belief, *Frankenstein* is not the full title of Mary Shelley's 200-year-old novel. It is actually titled, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Prometheus was Greek Titan known for his intelligence. He also reportedly created man from clay, then stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans enabling civilization. Why do you think the title only partially survived over the years? What is the significance of the title to the novel? How does it change your perception of Frankenstein?
9. How do Hollywood, pop culture, and *Frankenstein*'s many incarnations play a role in your previous perceptions of the novel? What wasn't in the story that you thought would be because of your preconceptions? What is the novel that surprised you? How are the characters different in modern adaptations, both physically and personality-wise?
10. Gender roles are an underlying theme throughout the book. Most of the women are domestic, often taking care of the children of the family and waiting for their betrothed to return home. How would the story be different if Elizabeth Lavenza, Victor Frankenstein's love, created the monster instead? Might she have been a better role model, maybe even maternal, towards her creature, as she is towards Victor's siblings?
11. Science was rapidly changing in the 1800s, and it continues to further advance today. For many readers, Shelley's novel serves as a warning of science gone awry and the irreversible outcomes of well-intentioned experiments. What are some scientific inventions/experiments that are happening right now that could lead to monstrous results?