

# Meet Mary Shelley



[Frankenstein] offers a rare opportunity to investigate the way that an individual work can merge into general consciousness: how a personal act of imagination may become myth.

—Christopher Small in *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley's fame as a writer rests on a single novel, *Frankenstein*. Millions of people who have never heard of Mary Shelley know her story through the films and other media inspired by the novel. The word "Frankenstein" has become a synonym for monster, and Shelley's tragic tale—about a well-intentioned student of science and his human-like creation—has been given myth-like status.

Born in 1797, Shelley was the daughter of two of England's leading intellectual radicals. Her father, William Godwin, was an influential political philosopher and novelist. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, was a pioneer in promoting women's rights and education. Shelley never knew her mother, who died ten days after giving birth, but she was influenced throughout her life by her mother's writings and reputation.

When Mary was four, her father remarried. Mary received no formal education, but Mr. Godwin encouraged his daughter to read from his well-stocked library. The Godwin household

was also a place of lively intellectual conversation. Many writers visited Godwin to talk about philosophy, politics, science, and literature.

When Mary was nine, she and her stepsister hid under a sofa to hear Samuel Taylor Coleridge recite his poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." This popular poem later influenced Shelley as she developed her ideas for *Frankenstein*.

Mary's future husband, the widely admired poet Percy Shelley, was one of her father's frequent visitors. When Mary was sixteen, she and Percy eloped to France. They married in 1816 and lived together for eight years, until Percy's early death. They spent their time traveling in Switzerland, Germany, and Italy, visiting with friends; studying literature, languages, music and art; and writing. In her journal, Shelley described her years with Percy as "romantic beyond romance." Her life during this period was also filled with personal tragedy. She gave birth to four children in five years, three of whom died as infants. Many critics have pointed out that thoughts of birth and death were much on Shelley's mind at the time she wrote *Frankenstein*.

Mary Shelley did not put her name on the novel when it was published in 1818. Many reviewers and readers assumed it was written by Percy Shelley because he had written the preface. Mary Shelley's name was first attached to the novel in the 1831 edition for which she wrote the introduction. Remembering back fifteen years, she explained in the introduction how an eighteen-year-old came to write the unusual novel.

After Percy's death in 1822 in a boating accident, Mary Shelley returned to England and supported herself, her son, and her father with her writings. She wrote four novels, including *The Last Man* (1826), a futuristic story about the destruction of the human race. She also wrote short stories, essays, and travelogues. To preserve her husband's literary legacy, she collected and annotated Percy Shelley's poems for publication. She died in 1851.

# Introducing the Novel

*I busied myself to think of a story. . . . One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror.*

—Mary Shelley

In the introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley explains how she came to write her famous novel. In the summer of 1816, she and Percy Shelley were living near the poet Lord Byron and his doctor-friend John Polidori on Lake Geneva in the Swiss Alps. During a period of incessant rain, the four of them were reading ghost stories to each other when Byron proposed that they each try to write one. For days Shelley could not think of an idea. Then, while she was listening to Lord Byron and Percy discussing the probability of using electricity to create life artificially, according to a theory called galvanism, an idea began to grow in her mind:

*Perhaps a corpse would be re-animated; galvanism had given token of such things; perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and [ended] with vital warmth.*

The next day she started work on *Frankenstein*. A year later, she had completed her novel. It was published in 1818, when Shelley was nineteen years old.

*Frankenstein* is an example of a gothic novel. This type of novel was popular between 1760 and 1820. The main ingredients of the gothic novel are mystery, horror, and the supernatural. The word *gothic* itself has several meanings. It can mean harsh or cruel, referring to the barbaric Gothic tribes of the Middle Ages. It can also mean "medieval," referring to the historical period associated with castles and knights in armor. In literature the term applies to works with a brooding atmosphere that emphasize the unknown and inspire fear. Gothic novels typically feature wild and remote settings, such as haunted castles or wind-blasted moors, and their plots involve violent or mysterious events.

While the atmosphere of Shelley's *Frankenstein* is nightmarish, the novel is much more than a

horror story. Shelley's central characters—a young student of science and the man-like being he creates—are both morally complex. Through their conflict, Shelley poses profound questions about science and society and about the positive and destructive sides of human nature. These questions struck a chord with Shelley's readers in the early 1800s—a time of startling breakthroughs in science and technology and a growing faith in the power of science to improve human life. Today, in a world where scientific advances such as cloning and genetic engineering seem to be redefining life itself, her questions are no less relevant.

## THE TIME AND PLACE

The novel takes place in the late 1700s in various parts of Europe, especially Switzerland and Germany, and in the Arctic. *Frankenstein* was published in 1818 in England at the height of the Romantic movement. This movement in art and literature was based in part on the feeling of optimism about human possibilities that pervaded Western culture after the American and French revolutions.

In England the post-revolutionary period was also a time of economic suffering and social disorder as the new industrialism transformed English society. Shelley's readers lived in hopeful, but also disturbingly turbulent, times.

The Romantic movement, which lasted from about 1798 to 1832, pulled away from the period known as the Enlightenment, which emphasized reason and logic. English writers of the Romantic period believed in the importance of the individual. They valued subjectivity, imagination, and the expression of emotions over rational thought. The typical Romantic hero, found especially in the poetry of Lord Byron and Percy Shelley, is passionate, uninhibited, and unconventional. Often the hero is an artist who is a social rebel or a melancholy outcast from society.

The Romantic poets, including William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John

# Before You Read

## Frankenstein Letters 1–4

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

What do you think spurs people to explore the unknown?

#### Share Ideas

In a small group, list ways in which people throughout the ages have explored the unknown. Also, identify some reasons why individuals devote themselves to a life of exploration and discovery. Does such devotion involve sacrifices?

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how two eighteenth-century men's lives are changed as they pursue their separate dreams of exploring the unknown.

### BACKGROUND

#### The Arctic

When the novel opens, an explorer named Robert Walton is organizing an expedition through the Arctic, the area around and within the Arctic Circle and near the North Pole. The Arctic Ocean covers most of this region, and more than half of the ocean's surface is frozen at all times. Travel by ship is extremely dangerous. Huge sheets of ice float through the frigid waters, threatening to crush the vessels that appear in their paths.

#### Did You Know?

In the letters, which set the stage for the novel, Robert Walton says he has been deeply affected by the narrative poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a leading poet of the Romantic era. In the poem, an old sailor or mariner, tells the story of a horrific sea voyage that changed his life. Sailing in stormy seas near the South Pole, the mariner's ship is surrounded by ice. When the crewmen spot an albatross, a huge seagull-like bird, flying through the fog, the ice splits open, freeing the ship. Then, unexpectedly, the mariner shoots the albatross. After this act of cruelty, the ship is cursed. Driven north, it becomes stranded in a hot, windless sea. All of the crew except the mariner die. Ever since, the remorseful mariner has traveled the world to tell his story and to teach others to revere God's creatures.

Walton's comments about "The Ancient Mariner" are examples of allusion. An allusion is a reference in a written work to something from history, art, religion, myth, or another work of literature. Writers use allusions to give readers additional insights about what is happening in the story and why. Shelley makes frequent use of literary allusions in *Frankenstein*.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

- ardent** [ˈɑrd ˈɒnt] *adj.* passionate
- countenance** [koun ˈteɪnəns] *n.* face; expression
- dauntless** [dɒnt ˈlɪs] *adj.* fearless
- harrowing** [hɑr ˈoʊɪŋ] *adj.* extremely distressing
- irrevocably** [ɪ rev ˈə keɪ blə] *adv.* in a way impossible to change
- mariner** [mɑr ˈə nəɪ] *n.* navigator of a ship
- perseverance** [pɜr ˈseɪv ˈerəns] *n.* steady persistence

Keats, and Percy Shelley, transport their readers to the private worlds of the poets' imaginations. Often, they isolate themselves in nature and celebrate its beauty or its elemental rawness.

They were also attracted to stories and settings from the past. Percy Shelley, for example, made Prometheus, the symbol of creative striving in Greek mythology, the hero of his poetic drama *Prometheus Unbound*.

### Did You Know?

In the early 1800s, scientists were on the verge of discovering the potential of electricity. At this time, scientists knew about the existence of static electricity as well as electricity produced by lightning. But they were just beginning to discover that electricity could be produced by a chemical reaction.

In the 1780s, Luigi Galvani, a professor of anatomy in Bologna, Italy, conducted experiments on animal tissue using a machine that could produce electrical sparks. He concluded that animal tissue contained electricity in the

Mary Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein* was labeled "romantic fiction" by an early reviewer. It is a powerful work of imagination that uses exotic natural settings and emphasizes the emotions of fear and awe. Many scholars also see her novel as a critique of Romantic ideals. The "modern Prometheus" she holds up for readers' evaluation, Dr. Frankenstein, is an ambiguous character who may or may not be worthy of our admiration.

form of a fluid. Galvani's theory of "animal electricity" was shown to be incorrect, but he had proven that muscles contracted in response to an electrical stimulus. His research opened the way to new discoveries about the operation of nerves and muscles and showed that electrical forces exist in living tissue. In the novel, Frankenstein learns about the controversial theory of "galvanism" as part of his scientific training at a university in Germany. Today, galvanism refers to a direct current of electricity produced by a chemical reaction.