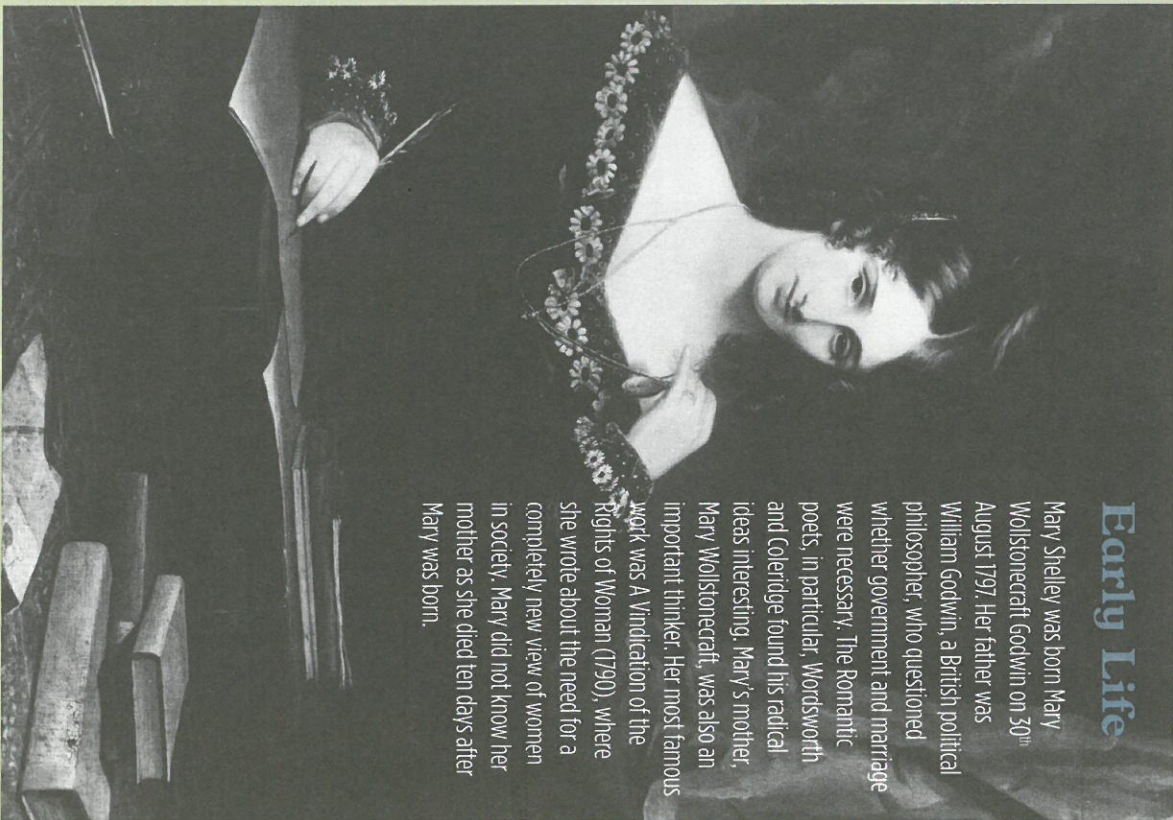


Mary Shelley

Early Life

Mary Shelley was born Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin on 30th August 1797. Her father was William Godwin, a British political philosopher, who questioned whether government and marriage were necessary. The Romantic poets, in particular, Wordsworth and Coleridge found his radical ideas interesting. Mary's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was also an important thinker. Her most famous work was *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1790), where she wrote about the need for a completely new view of women in society. Mary did not know her mother as she died ten days after Mary was born.



Love

Mary's father had many admirers, including Percy Bysshe Shelley, one of England's most important Romantic poets. Shelley was a regular visitor to the Godwin house. In 1814, Mary and Shelley ran away to Europe, she was only 16 and Shelley was married with two children. English society at the time was shocked and for all his radical ideas, so was her father. Mary became pregnant, but the child was born prematurely and died.

Frankenstein

In 1816, Mary and Shelley went to spend the summer with Shelley's friend Lord Byron who had rented a house on the shores of Lake Geneva. It was here that Mary started to write *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*. At the end of 1816, following the suicide of Shelley's wife, Harriet, the couple got married. They travelled around Italy, had two more children, but both died. Eventually, Mary gave birth to Percy Florence who survived. Mary's father was unsympathetic about his daughter's tragedies and financial difficulties.

Later Years

In 1822, Mary's husband drowned in a sailing accident in the Bay of La Spezia, Italy. She and her son, Percy, returned to England in 1823, where she devoted herself

to him. Although she wrote other books, *Frankenstein* was the only one which was commercially successful. In her later years, she became close to her father again. Mary died (probably of a brain tumour) on 1st February 1851, aged 55.

Task

Complete the form with the information about Mary Shelley.

Name:

Date of birth:

Occupation:

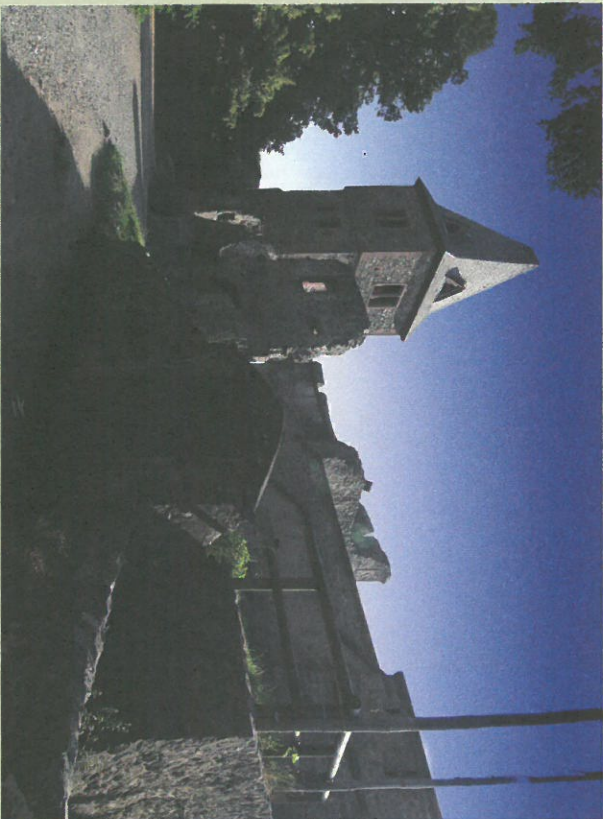
A Shocking Tale

The Birth of Frankenstein

In 1816, Shelley and Mary spent the summer with Lord Byron in Switzerland. The men spent their time talking, reading and discussing the latest ideas and discoveries, both philosophical and scientific. Mary says she simply listened to the conversations. That summer was grey and wet. Mary wrote later, 'incessant rain often confined us for days to the house.' Lord Byron made a suggestion to keep them all busy, 'We will each write a ghost story,' he said. Mary wanted her story to terrify her readers. She

spent a long time thinking of a story 'which would speak to the mysterious fear of our nature... one to make the reader afraid to look round, to curdle the blood and quicken the beatings of the heart.'

Then one night in a waking dream she saw a frightening scene of a man lying apparently dead. Another man started 'a powerful engine' and the dead man came to life. The man who had created this new life was horrified by what he had done and ran away. Mary opened her eyes, terrified by what she had seen, but she now knew what her 'ghost story' would be about.



Ruins of Castle Frankenstein, in Germany, which gave the title to Mary Shelley's novel.

Frankenstein and the Critics



Title page of the 1831 edition.

When the novel was first published, anonymously, in 1818, many critics were shocked by it. The most shocking element of the novel was the idea of a human being as a creator. This was seen as 'impious' or disrespectful of God. Most of the critics thought the book had been written by a man. It was still unusual for women to write at that time and the story was both frightening and unpleasant in its concentration on death and dying – not thought of a suitable for a young lady. Many critics did see the power of Mary Shelley's writing however. One magazine wrote '[the book] possesses a power of fascination... it has an air of reality attached to it.'

In spite of the critics, the book was immediately popular with the public, it was quickly turned into a play and was also translated into French. In the 200 years since its publication, Frankenstein has become part of our cultural heritage.

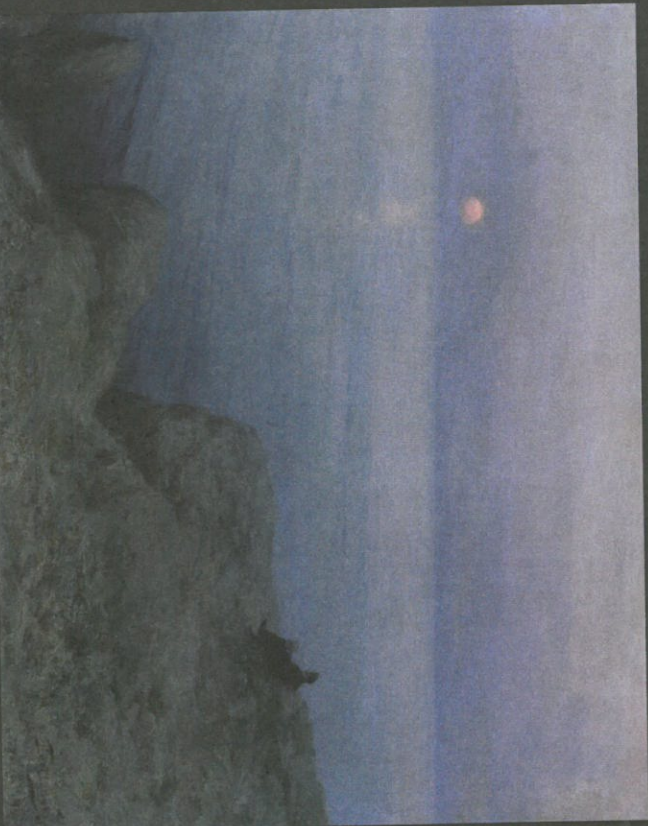
Task True or False?

- 1 In 1826, Shelley and Mary spent the summer with Lord Byron in Germany.
- 2 Mary spent her time talking, reading and discussing.
- 3 Mary wrote a story to terrify her readers.
- 4 One night she saw a frightening scene of a man lying apparently dead.

T F

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Major Themes in Frankenstein



Aleksandr Puskin at the Seashore, 1896

Nature

Throughout the book, Victor and the monster both find psychological peace in nature, including the mountains and lakes of Switzerland. The book expresses the Romantic view of the sublime beauty of nature and its spiritual power.

Death

Victor is fascinated by death and there are a number of violent deaths in the story.

The weather and the elements

Victor discovers electricity during a thunderstorm; when he reaches the place where his brother was murdered, he says that the storm is like a funeral for him. The ice and cold of the north eventually kill Victor.

Alienation

the book explores what can happen when people are

deliberately excluded from society. It looks at the 'other' and questions how we define ourselves.

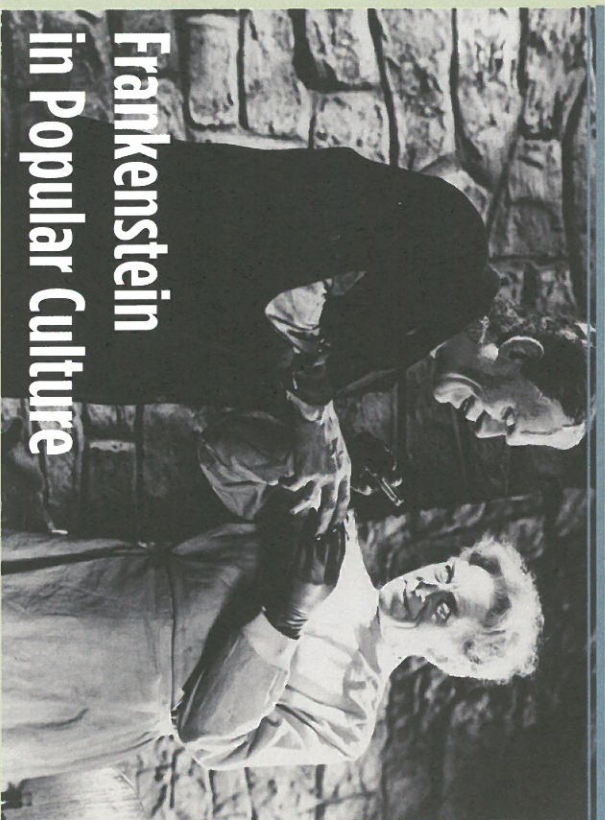
Madness

From the beginning of the book Victor shows obsessive tendencies; cannot control his emotions and is twice kept in prison as a result of what we would now call a mental breakdown.

Biographical and Historical Timeline

Select cultural, scientific and biographical timeline from Mary Shelley's birth to the publication of Frankenstein.

1797	Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin born.	1814	First plastic surgery carried out in London.
1801	The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland is formed.	1815	Premier of Beethoven's Eighth Symphony.
	First steam-powered vehicle demonstrated by Richard Trevithick.	1816	Battle of Waterloo, end of the Napoleonic Wars.
	The first census is carried out. The population of England and Wales is 8.9 million.	1816	'Kubla Khan' is published by Coleridge.
1802	Marie Tussaud opens her waxworks museum in London.		'The year without a summer' - disruption to climate in Europe and N. America following a volcanic eruption.
1803	Start of the Napoleonic Wars.		Mary Shelley starts writing Frankenstein.
1807	Pall Mall is first street with gas street lamps.	1818	First blood transfusion using human blood.
	The slave trade is abolished in the British Empire.		Emily Bronte, author of Wuthering Heights, born.
1809	Charles Darwin born.		John Keats writes 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'The Eve of St Agnes'. Frankenstein is published, anonymously.
	The 'Hindoostanee Coffee House,' London's first Indian restaurant is opened.		
1811	Prince George becomes Regent, because of his father, George III's, insanity. This period is known as the English Regency.		
1813	Jane Austen's <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> is published.		
	First steam-powered warship launched in New York.		



Frankenstein in Popular Culture

The actor Boris Karloff in *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), directed by James Whale

Frankenstein is the story of ambitious scientist, Victor Frankenstein, but most people believe that it is the monster who is called Frankenstein.

The book is seen as the first modern science fiction story, with its 'mad scientist' and an alien monster. Like much science fiction it uses technology which had not been invented at the time of writing, however, it also has many of the traditional elements of gothic horror. In 1931, Hollywood released a film version of

the book starring Boris Karloff as the monster.

His appearance was so dramatic, with his square head and bolt through his neck, that this is what many people think the monster looks like. This was the first time Victor became 'Dr' Frankenstein.

Young Frankenstein is a comedy version of the story. It stars Gene Wilder as the mad scientist's grandson who wants to repeat the experiment, unfortunately his assistant, Igor, gives him the wrong brain...

Task

True or False?

- 1 Frankenstein is the story of ambitious artist.
- 2 It is the monster who is called Frankenstein.
- 3 The book is the first modern science fiction story.
- 4 In 1931, Hollywood released a film version of the book.

T F

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The Relevance of Frankenstein



The Industrial Revolution

Frankenstein was written as the Industrial Revolution was taking off, in an age when there were many new technological and scientific discoveries. It is no coincidence that Mary Shelley's book is still popular today, when so much is changing in our world and so quickly.

DNA

Although DNA, the building block for life, was not discovered until the 1960s, Frankenstein seems to look forward to today's genetic sciences. Throughout the world there is strong debate about whether it is ok to make genetically modified organisms, to carry out research on human foetuses, or on stem cells – cells which develop very early in a human foetus – all discussed as part of bioethics.

Critics

Critics say that scientists are 'playing God' and are shocked by human beings creating new forms of life. However, this type of research is providing cures for fatal diseases, and a deeper understanding of how life works. Frankenstein is a story about what could happen if we do not think about what we are doing.