

British Masterpiece

from *Frankenstein*

Novel by Mary Shelley



Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley
1797–1851



READING 5A Analyze how complex plot structures and devices function and advance the action in a work of fiction. **5B** Analyze the moral dilemmas and quandaries presented in works of fiction as revealed by the underlying motivations and behaviors of the characters.

BACKGROUND Mary Shelley was only eighteen when she wrote the novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. Shelley claimed that, while on a visit to Lord Byron with her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Byron suggested they hold a contest to write the best “ghost story.” Even though she competed with two of the greatest poets of the day, it was Mary who produced the tale that would stand the test of time. Published anonymously in 1818, *Frankenstein* was an immediate popular success and one of the most effective gothic horror tales ever written. As a story of science gone awry, it warned against the dangers of the new industrial age and the desire to control nature; as the original source of all “mad scientist” stories, it is a pioneering work of science fiction and horror that has spawned countless film and stage adaptations.

The novel tells of obsessive Swiss scientist Victor Frankenstein, who uses an electrical charge to animate a lifeless body he has pieced together from human remains. He dreams of creating a perfect being; instead, he produces a miserable monster who causes harm and destruction wherever he goes as he faces rejection, rather than understanding, from those he encounters. The following excerpt is from the famous fifth chapter of the novel, in which Frankenstein describes his creature coming to life. When Frankenstein sees the result of his failed experiment, he rejects his creation in “horror and disgust.”

LITERARY ANALYSIS Frankenstein’s monster is more than just a scientific experiment gone wrong. Monsters in literature are not just fantastic grotesques whose unusual appearance and behavior terrifies others. They act as mirrors, reflecting difficult truths about society and culture, such as the failure to treat with compassion those we do not understand.

The monster reflects the fears and flaws of his creator—aspects that Frankenstein cannot face about himself. In this excerpt, Shelley uses similar imagery and **diction**, or word choice, to describe both Frankenstein and his monster and show how closely the two are connected. In line 4, “a convulsive motion agitate[s]” the monster’s limbs; in line 29, as Frankenstein awakens from his dream, his “every limb became convulsed.” He sees the monster lurking at his bedside illuminated “by the dim and yellow light of the moon” that echoes the monster’s own “dull yellow eye” in line 3. What other examples of imagery and diction linking the monster and his creator can you find in the following excerpt?

DISCUSS Create a list of contemporary examples of monsters from literature, film, or television. Compile a brief list of their physical and psychological characteristics. Why are they so frightening? What is human about them? What messages about the dark side of society do you think they convey?



It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing;
10 his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.

The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room and continued a long time traversing my bedchamber, unable to compose my mind
20 to sleep. At length lassitude succeeded to the tumult I had before endured, and I threw myself on the bed in my clothes, endeavouring to seek a few moments of forgetfulness. But it was in vain; I slept, indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams. I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow
30 light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped and rushed downstairs.

