Mary Shelley and Frankenstein

Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein
by K. Branagh, 1994
1. Mary Shelley’s life

- The daughter of the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft and the philosopher William Godwin. In her childhood she was surrounded by intellectuals, and she developed a romantic sensibility, revolutionary ideas and concern for the rights of people.

- She ran away to France with the Romantic poet Percy B. Shelley.

- The writing of *Frankenstein* took place at Villa Diodati near Lake Geneva.

- Mary returned to England in 1823, after the tragic death of her husband.
2. *Frankenstein* and its plot

- **The idea** of this novel originated one stormy night, when Mary was together with Shelley and the poet Byron, in their house on Lake Geneva and they decided to write a ghost story each. First, Mary didn’t have any idea, but then came up with this original story. She wrote it in 1816, but it was only published in 1818.

- **Frankenstein**, a Swiss scientist, creates a human being by **joining parts of corpses**.

- The result of the experiment is **ugly** and **revolting**.

- The **monster** becomes a **murderer** and at the end he **destroys his creator**.

- The story is not told chronologically and has an unusual narrative structure.

- Mary was influenced by some ideas of her parents about social justice and education.
The latest scientific theories of chemistry and electricity influenced Mary Shelley.

The protagonist of *Frankenstein*, *created artificially*, is the first embodiment of the theme of science and its responsibility to mankind.
4. Influences: from Prometheus to Frankenstein

- The subtitle “Modern Prometheus” refers to the myth of Prometheus who wanted to steal fire from the gods and give it to mankind (overcoming his human limits).

- Rousseau ➔ The monster is a noble savage, not influenced by civilization.

- S. T. Coleridge’s The Rime of the Ancient Mariner ➔ Both the novel and the poem are stories of a crime against nature.

- Gothic stories read by Mary and Percy B. Shelley.

Poster Whale. for the 1931 film ‘Frankenstein’ directed by James
5. Narrative structure: an epistolary novel

Walton’s narration to his sister Margaret Walton Saville (chapters 1-10)

Frankenstein’s narration to Walton (chapters 11-17)

The monster’s narration to Frankenstein (chapters 18-24)

This structure presents different points of view.
6. Main characters and Themes

• Both Captain Walton and Doctor Frankenstein try to go beyond human limits because they want to reach forbidden knowledge (theme of the overreacher).

• The monster is complementary to his creator (theme of the double): they both suffer from isolation (dr. Frankenstein isolates himself from society to follow his passion for science) and they both begin with a desire to be good but end up with a desire of revenge.

Black and white poster for James Whale’s 1931 film ‘Frankenstein’.
• The **overcoming of natural and divine rules** ➔ the **creation** of a human being without the participation of a **woman**.

• **Moral responsibility of the scientist** (do we have the right to overcome natural limits?)

• **Social prejudices** ➔ the monster as an **outcast**: the monster is isolated from society.

• **Society’s responsibility** in creating social evils/ social injustice: the monster is an innocent victim of society’s rejection and persecution, which drives him to commit evil.

• **Education** and **experience** ➔ the novel shows the monster’s **intellectual** and **emotional development**.
Frankenstein is more than a Gothic novel: it has some elements of horror, fear, suspense, danger and a macabre atmosphere. However, it is not set in a dark castle and it substitutes the supernatural with science.

For this reason, it can be considered a forerunner of science-fiction.
In your comment on the passage, consider:

- the setting
- describe the monster
- describe how Frankenstein’s feelings change before and after the creation.