

## Discussion Questions for Week Five: Mary Shelley

- (1) *Frankenstein* is a frame narrative—that is, it is a story within a story (and, when the Creature tells his story, a story within a story within a story). What are the effects of such a frame? How does it influence the way you read the novel? What is Shelley attempting to do with this narrative structure?
- (2) How do you describe the relationship between Walton and Frankenstein? What are the most significant similarities and/or differences between these two characters?
- (3) What we now consider to be “the sciences” (biology, chemistry, physics, psychology) were just emerging as distinct fields in the early nineteenth century. In the novel, “natural philosophy” typically refers to all of the sciences. How does Shelley depict the sciences? Do you see any parallels in today’s society?
- (4) Why does Frankenstein flee in terror when the Creature comes to life?
- (5) Frankenstein’s first confrontation with the Creature may seem surprising, given how the Creature is usually depicted in contemporary media. In contrast to popular versions of a monstrous and incoherent monster, the Creature in the novel is exceedingly eloquent and articulate, and he succeeds in persuading Frankenstein to listen to his tale despite his seemingly grotesque appearance. Why do think Shelley chose to make the Creature so intelligent?
- (6) What role does domesticity play in the novel? For example, how does the Creature’s domestic circle relate to that of Frankenstein? and why is domesticity so important to both Frankenstein and the Creature?
- (7) Are you persuaded by the Creature’s autobiographical tale that emphasizes *tabula rasa* (“blank slate”)? Is it, as the Creature claims, society’s/Frankenstein’s fault that the Creature becomes so destructive (i.e., “I am malicious because I am miserable”)? Would he have been treated differently and thus turned into a different person had he looked like an “average” human (or, even more specifically for the nineteenth century, a white man)?
- (8) Why does Frankenstein destroy the female Creature? Do you agree with his reasoning?
- (9) Is there a moral to this story? What does each character learn, if anything?
- (10) Feminist scholars read Frankenstein as a male figure who desires to create life without his female counterpart, Elizabeth. Frankenstein consistently puts off his marriage/relationship with Elizabeth; he never shows consistent love or tenderness for Elizabeth; and he leaves her alone on their wedding night when he knows the Creature has promised to ruin their marriage. Frankenstein, in effect, is punished for transgressing the social and “natural” laws of human relationships and procreation. Is this a convincing way to read the novel? Why or why not?
- (11) Harriet Hustis has alternatively read this feminist interpretation of the novel as centered on the issue of “responsibility creativity.” In Hustis’s reading, the novel is not so much about transgressing social laws as it is about the “duty” a creator has to his or her creation. Frankenstein is punished for *abandoning* his creation, not for creating it in the first place. This reading extends to the novel itself. What “duty” do authors have to the public when they publish novels, poems, or other writings? Is this a convincing way to read the novel?