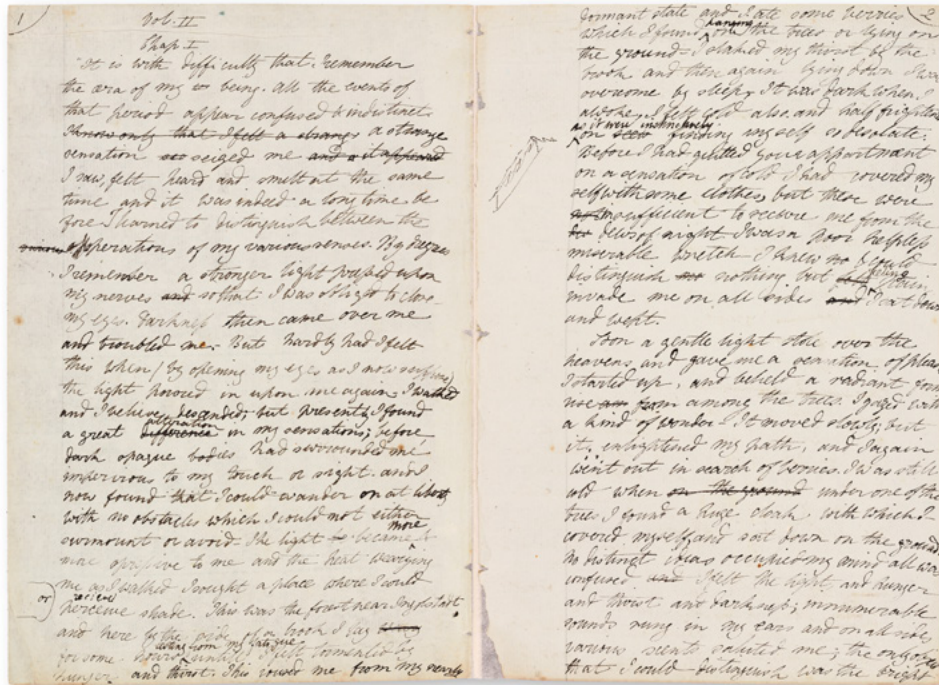# SECTION THREE: WRITING AND EDITING FRANKENSTEIN

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797 - 1851), *Frankenstein: Creature begins his history*, account of his education, 1816-1817, Pen on paper, The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford, MS Abinger c. 57, fols. 1v, 2r.

WRITING THE NOVEL

Frankenstein was not created in isolation. Like the Creature, it is composed of many different parts.

Mary Shelley (1797–1851) was greatly influenced by scientific discoveries, political events, and movements in literature and art of her time. Some of the more specific sources for the novel include poetry from contemporaries such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), William Wordsworth (1770–1850), and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822). Mary Shelley also looked to the past, both to the ancient past such as the Roman biographer Plutarch (CE 46–CE 120) and to earlier English writers such as John Milton (1608–1674). The novel quotes from many different literary works and refers to Mary Shelley's own eclectic education.

It can be argued that Mary Shelley drew upon some of her fantasies and her frustrations with her father, deceased mother, and complex family life through the novel. Victor's idyllic childhood seems like the wish fulfillment of the teenage Mary Shelley. The novel was dedicated to Shelley's father William Godwin, whom she adored as a child, but was estranged from after her relationship with P. B. Shelley began. *Frankenstein* explores relationships and obligations between families, parents, and children.

Mary Shelley was also inspired by her travels abroad. Many scenes from her 1814 trip with P. B. Shelley and her stepsister Claire are incorporated into the landscape of the novel. For example, Mary Shelley may have noticed a castle known as Schloss Frankenstein when they passed by it on the Rhine. The castle is the possible birthplace of Johann Konrad Dippel, an eighteenth century alchemist who is said to have tried to create artificial life with a chemical compound named Dippel's oil. Many of the sites around Geneva feature in the novel as part of Victor and Elizabeth's travels to their wedding.

The concepts of parental responsibility, loss, loneliness and social isolation are apparent across different characters in the novel. Mary Shelley's mother died ten days after giving birth. Then, in March 1815 at the age of 17, Shelley lost her first child after only a few weeks of life. In 1816, Shelley's half-sister, Fanny Godwin, and Percy Bysshe's first wife, Harriet Shelley, committed suicide within two months of each other. Mary Shelley and her father were at odds during her marriage to P. B., and Shelley was under heavy social scrutiny for her elopement.

Despite all of these adverse circumstances, Mary Shelley took only ten months (June 1816–April 1817) to complete the first draft of the novel at the age of eighteen. In January 1816, she gave birth to a second child, William, and she married P. B. Shelley in December of that year. She was pregnant with a third child, Clara, and caring for five-month-old William when she began writing *Frankenstein*.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797 - 1851), *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus.* London, Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831, The Morgan Library & Museum, PML 58778.

P.B. Shelley was her first reader and editor, and she often took his suggestions. She published the novel anonymously in January 1818, with her husband providing a preface to the 1818 edition. Tragedy continued to strike the couple's young children, and by 1819, both her daughter Clara and her son William had died. In November of 1819, another son, Percy Florence, was born. Percy Florence became the couple's only surviving child.

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus blended ideas from the Romantic and Gothic traditions. With the Gothic material, it added new scenarios and nuances; the idea of the laboratory and a natural philosopher (scientist) as a setting for horror was a new take on the stories of ghosts, castles, and desolate moors. Yet the modernism of *Frankenstein* was also combined with the power of the ghost story or folktale, with the appearance of the Creature and his reanimation never fully explained, leaving the horror to the imagination of the reader. Although she published the novel anonymously, Mary Shelley's authorship was widely known, and her notorious relationship with P. B. Shelley as well as her famous parents added to the celebrity of the novel. The novel's adaptation to the stage in 1823 created free publicity though no royalties for the author. As later sections will explore, *Frankenstein* captured the popular imagination as an adapted work, and is still inspiring new versions today.

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SECTION 3

AFTER THE NOVEL'S PUBLICATION

By the summer of 1822, the Shelleys were living with friends in Italy. The summer would end tragically. Mary Shelley suffered a near-fatal miscarriage and P. B. Shelley drowned in a sailing accident.

By the time the novel became famous Mary Shelley had given birth to four children, buried three, and become a widow. The novel had become a blockbuster after its first theatrical staging in 1823. **Copyright** laws at the time meant Mary Shelley earned nothing from theatrical productions, but the play's popularity drove book sales. She moved to England where her father, William Godwin, helped publish a second edition of the novel to capitalize on its newfound fame. The third edition was published in 1831. In this version, the character of Elizabeth became an orphan instead of Victor's cousin (removing the implication of incest), Clerval's character was further developed, and Victor was burdened by an even guiltier conscience. These changes reflected shifting morals as Romantic ideals began giving way to Victorian mores.

Mary Shelley wrote more than one novel. One of her other works is *The Last Man*, a **dystopia** set in a world decimated by disease published in 1826. She wrote travel pieces and for periodicals, and was able to send her son Percy Florence to Cambridge with her earnings and a small allowance from her father-in-law (given to her on the condition that she not bring the Shelley name before the public). She was courted by other men but never remarried. She said she longed for intimacy but, as she wrote to a friend, "experience and sufferings have altered all that—I am more wrapt up in myself ... & prospects for Percy" (qtd. in Denlinger, 170). In place of romance, she was sustained by friendships with women.

Percy Florence eventually became heir to the Shelley estates when P. B. Shelley's father Sir Timothy Shelley died in 1844, and their financial worries were eased. Mary Shelley died in 1851 in London. Percy Florence and his wife, Jane, built a shrine to Mary Shelley and P. B. Shelley at their new house and moved Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's graves so they could all be buried together—with the exception of P. B. Shelley, who was buried in Rome.

Another descendant from the circle of Mary Shelley was Ada Lovelace, the daughter of Lord Byron and Anne Isabella Milbanke. Encouraged in math by her mother to counteract her poet father's outrageous lifestyle, Lovelace became a brilliant mathematician who wrote algorithms to be carried out by a hypothetical computer. She is often considered the first computer programmer.
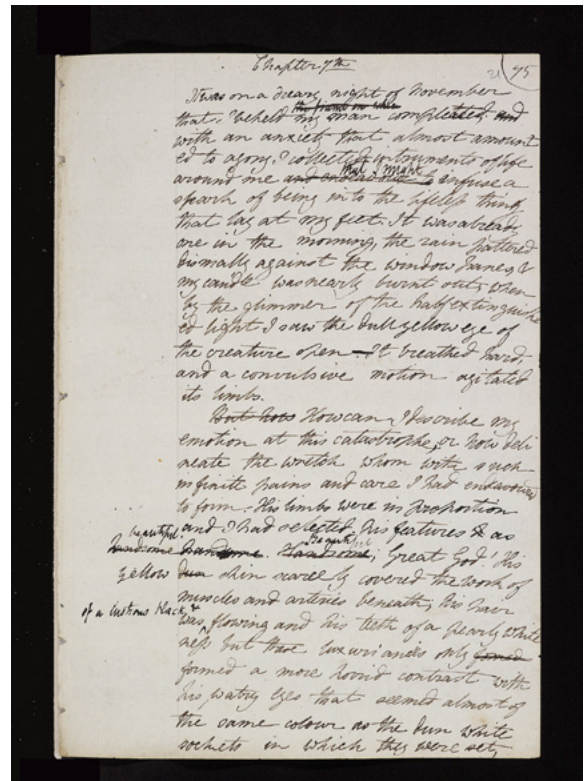
OBJECTS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

OBJECT: MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY (1797–1851), *FRANKENSTEIN: "IT WAS ON A DREARY NIGHT IN NOVEMBER"* 1816–1817, PEN ON PAPER

Mary Shelley's handwritten first draft also features revisions by P. B. Shelley. This section of the manuscript includes the scene that Mary said first came to her when envisioning the novel: the dreary night in November when the Creature awakes. P. B. suggests adding "of a lustrous black" to Mary's description of the Creature's hair and suggests changing "handsome" (a more conventional word choice) to "beautiful" in the description of what Victor hoped the Creature might look like. On the left side of this spread, she cuts a section that would have inhibited the flow of action.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797 - 1851), *Frankenstein: It was on a dreary night in November,* 1816-1817, The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford, MS Abinger c. 56, fol. 21.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

⚡ Ask students to examine these **manuscript pages** carefully. Help students distinguish between Mary's handwriting and P. B. Shelley's. What do they notice about the choices each writer makes?

⚡ The exhibition curator writes that P.B.'s edits make "the prose more lush" (Denlinger, 138). Ask students where and how they see him doing this.

⚡ Ask students to think about the manuscript page in front of them. What would they have edited if Mary Shelley had asked for their feedback? Ask them to defend their choices. **(Teachers may even want to print copies for each student and ask them to make edits onto the copy.)**

⚡ Mary Shelley completed the first draft of this novel in less than ten months. Ask students what they think the editing process was like for her. Make connections to students' personal experience with the editing process. What is challenging? What do they learn in the process?

⚡ Mary Shelley's revisions did not end with this version of the manuscript. She edited it again after it was published for the third edition in 1831. Ask students to consider how the editing process might change once a book has already been published. Consider the fact that the novel was by then famous because of theatrical productions based on its plot. How might these factors affect Mary's editing process?

OBJECT: ATTRIBUTED TO EDWARD ELLERKER WILLIAMS (1793–1822), *PORTRAIT OF PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY* (1792–1822), 19TH CENTURY, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER

This portrait of P. B. Shelley shows him getting older, graying at the sideburns and putting on weight. Historians believe the artist was Edward Ellerker Williams, who was living with the Shelleys in Italy during the summer of 1822. The Shelleys had grown close to Edward Williams and his wife, Jane. P. B. Shelley and Edward Williams died together in a boating accident less than a month before P. B. Shelley's thirtieth birthday.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

⚡ Historians believe that this was painted by Shelley's friend and housemate during the summer of 1822. What do students think about the way Williams depicted P. B. Shelley? How does he characterize Shelley?

⚡ How do students think they would be depicted differently by a friend versus someone they don't know?

⚡ As a class, explore a text by P. B. Shelley, such as the poem "Ozymandias." Ask students what they notice about his style and subject matter. Ask them to compare it to *Frankenstein's* style and subject matter. While P. B. Shelley was not a popular writer in his lifetime, he is now well known—due in large part to Mary Shelley's efforts to edit and publish his works. P. B. Shelley also helped Mary edit her writing. Ask students to discuss how Mary and P. B.'s relationship may have affected their writing and careers.

Edward Ellerker Williams (1793–1822), *Portrait of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1822, watercolor over black chalk and graphite on wove paper. The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of Mrs. W. Murray Crane, 1949. 1949.3.

OBJECT: RICHARD ROTHWELL (1800–1868), *PORTRAIT OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY*, 1840, OIL ON CANVAS

After Percy Bysshe's death, Mary Shelley went through a period of social isolation. By the beginning of 1830 she wrote in her journal about how this was changing at least a little bit: "I have begun a new kind of life somewhat—going a little into society ... People like me & flatter & follow me, & then I am left alone again. Poverty being a barrier I cannot pass—still I am often amused & sometimes interested" (qtd. in Denlinger, 181). She met the painter Richard Rothwell and he began to attend her parties (where she only welcomed people who would not "gossip about her past" [qtd. in Denlinger, 181]). Rothwell's specialty was portraits of people in high society. In this portrait he painted of her, she still wore the black velvet appropriate for a widow. She could not afford to purchase this portrait but later her daughter-in-law, Jane, the wife of Percy Florence, acquired it and left it to the National Portrait Gallery.
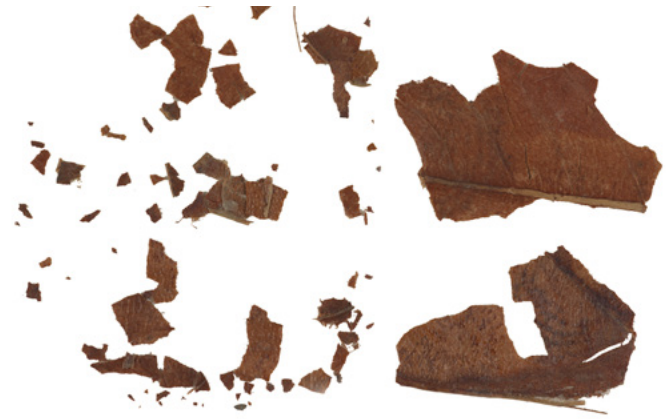

Richard Rothwell (1800–1868), portrait of *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, painted 1831, exhibited 1840, oil on canvas. © National Portrait Gallery, London

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

⚡ This portrait was painted at a time in Shelley's life when she was emerging from a period of social isolation. She had just begun to have parties with people in her circle who would not bring up her past. Knowing what was happening in her life, what do students think about the way she was depicted in this portrait? Ask students to describe her clothing, facial expression, posture, and the background

⚡ Ask students to imagine that they could give the painter suggestions for revisions to the portrait that could communicate more about Shelley's state of mind. What do they think he should have changed or added? For instance, if he could add one prop to the portrait, what should it be?

⚡ Choose any two portraits *(Portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft, Portrait of William Godwin, Portrait of Percy Bysshe Shelley, or Portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley)* from the exhibition and write an imagined dialogue between them. Which two portraits did you choose and why?

OBJECT: PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY (1792–1822), FRAGMENTS OF SHELLEY'S SKULL, 1822

Percy Bysshe Shelley drowned at sea with two other companions. They were last seen on July 8 and their bodies washed up on the shore on July 18 and 19. Their bodies were so damaged by days at sea that P. B. Shelley had to be identified by his clothing and a copy of Keats's poems in his pocket. The Italian health authorities required that their bodies be removed quickly. One of Shelley's friends, Edward John Trelawny, organized a ceremony to cremate their bodies on the beach, using frankincense to cover the smell. The scene nauseated Byron yet, according to Trelawny, he asked for Shelley's skull: "Lord B. wished much to have the skull if possible—which I endeavoured to preserve—but before any part

Percy Bysshe Shelley, skull fragments, 1822. The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

of the flesh was consumed on it, on attempting to move it—it broke to pieces—it was unusually thin and strikingly small" (qtd. in Denlinger, 180). Trelawny famously reached into the fire to save what he thought was P. B. Shelley's heart, and Mary Shelley had to fight to keep it. The ashes of this organ were found after her death in her writing desk, tucked into a copy of P. B. Shelley's poem *Adonais* along with locks of hair from her dead children, and were buried with her. The rest of P. B. Shelley's body was eventually buried in Rome.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

⚡ Encourage students to think about *Frankenstein* as a product of its time, place, and the culture of the Shelleys' friends. Death was a regular feature of life at the time. By 1823, at age 26, Mary Shelley had lost her mother, three of her four children, her half-sister, her niece, and her husband, among others. Medicine was less advanced and both childbirth and early childhood were dangerous with high mortality rates. How does the novel reflect anxieties about maternity and mortality? What is the relationship of Victor to his mother, and how does the lack of a mother affect the Creature?

⚡ Victor Frankenstein wants to use science to combat mortality. Ask students if they can think of other stories—in movies, books, songs, or television shows—in which a character tries to defy death and achieve immortality. How do they end? What are the messages these stories convey?

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SECTION 3

ACTIVITIES

1. THE CREATURE'S EDUCATION:

Mary Shelley grew up surrounded by Enlightenment ideas of child development in the Godwin household. Essential to these ideas were John Locke's theories about children's minds being formed by their experiences, interactions, and surroundings. She was also influenced by the writing of the Genevan philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who criticized the transition in human development from a primitive or natural state to a civilized one. As she wrote the novel and cared for her own infant son, Mary Shelley likely thought of Locke and her parents' writings.

Ask students to identify sections of the text that deal with child (or Creature) development or education. For instance, the three narrators—Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the Creature are all autodidacts, self-taught individuals, to varying extents.

Does the plot support Locke's notion of children being shaped by experience? Why or why not? What does the novel suggest about learning in isolation? Do Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the Creature demonstrate any areas of ignorance, despite their education?

While he is with the cottagers, the Creature is exposed to Francois Volney's *Ruins of Empire* as well as three other books: Plutarch's *Lives,* John Milton's *Paradise Lost,* and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. These books form the basis of his education and were all personally significant to Mary Shelley. Discuss which books or other forms of art (such as film, music, or visual art) you would share with a "blank slate" being like the Creature. Discuss how they might affect the Creature's development. Do you think your choices would make a more peaceful Creature or a more dangerous one?

2. SHELLEY'S EDITING PROCESS:

All of Mary Shelley's original manuscript pages are digitized and available online. These pages include P. B. Shelley's revisions. For this activity, encourage students to select their favorite chapter from Frankenstein and then visit the site below to find Mary Shelley's first draft of this chapter. Ask students to compare the edition they read to the original manuscript. What has changed? Which edits were suggested by P. B. Shelley as early as the original manuscript and which were made later? How did the manuscript change? Invite students to present on what they learned. How would they describe Shelley's editing process? Which elements did she change most?

shelleygodwinarchive.org/contents/frankenstein/

3. FRANKENSTEIN: THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION :

Mary Shelley published three editions of Frankenstein. Students can see changes she made for her 1831 edition in this **link**. Mary Shelley wrote edits directly into a printed first edition of the book. In her revisions, she made minor plot changes and shifted the tone of certain passages. For example, Mary Shelley heightened the suspense of Elizabeth and Victor's doomed wedding by extending their approach to their honeymoon site.

For this activity, students will reimagine a scene for a new edition of the novel. Encourage them to think broadly about these changes—including dialogue, character, and setting. Which scene would they expand or remove? What language altered? What character changes would they make?

A. For the first part of the activity, begin with an original manuscript page. Ask students to edit the page. What did they change? Did they alter language to make it more modern? Did they change setting, mood, or characters?

B. For the second part of the activity, encourage students to start with the plot synopsis of the novel included in this curriculum, or prepare their own summary. Working with a partner, they should rewrite a section from the synopsis. Students could consider how to modernize the story or expand or contract the roles of supporting characters such as Elizabeth, Justine or Henry. Do they want to change anything about the Creature? Do they envision a different story for the Creature's mate that Victor destroys before completion? How do students want to change the novel's plot and why?

4. THE MODERN PROMETHEUS AND LITERARY ALLUSIONS :

The full title of Mary Shelley's novel is *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Encourage students to research the myth of **Prometheus** and discuss why the story is referred to in the novel's subtitle. In Greek mythology, Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to the human race. For this act, he was punished by Zeus by being eternally chained to a rock and having his liver eaten by an eagle every day and growing it back every night to be eaten again the next day.

Victor Frankenstein is a Promethean figure, as he is a human performing an action typically restricted to the divine. Prometheus is not the only literary **allusion** in the text. There are many Biblical references, as the Creature first identies with the mythical first man, Adam, but later identifies with the bitter fallen angel Satan. The Creature's desire for a mate is expressed as the desire for an Eve to "soothe [his] sorrows" (134). The book opens with a quote from Adam in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "Did I request thee, Maker from my clay/To mold me man?"

For this activity, encourage students to discuss allusions they find in the story. How do they influence their understandings of the characters?

A. Create a "modern" character inspired by a mythological or biblical allusion. Whether it is a modern Adam or Eve, a modern Prometheus, or something else entirely, encourage students to draw or paint a picture of their character. They should present their character to the class and explain the allusion.

B. As an alternative, students could write a short story or design a comic book cover in which the character features prominently.