

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley PLOT SUMMARY

Summary: Preface

Frankenstein opens with a preface, signed by Mary Shelley but commonly supposed to have been written by her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley. It states that the novel was begun during a summer vacation in the Swiss Alps, when unseasonably rainy weather and nights spent reading German ghost stories inspired the author and her literary companions to engage in a ghost story writing contest, of which this work is the only completed product.

Summary: Letter 1

The novel itself begins with a series of letters from the explorer Robert Walton to his sister, Margaret Saville. Walton, a well-to-do Englishman with a passion for seafaring, is the captain of a ship headed on a dangerous voyage to the North Pole. In the first letter, he tells his sister of the preparations leading up to his departure and of the desire burning in him to accomplish "some great purpose"—discovering a northern passage to the Pacific, revealing the source of the Earth's magnetism, or simply setting foot on undiscovered territory.

Summary: Letters 2–3

In the second letter, Walton bemoans his lack of friends. He feels lonely and isolated, too sophisticated to find comfort in his shipmates and too uneducated to find a sensitive soul with whom to share his dreams. He shows himself a Romantic, with his "love for the marvellous, a belief in the marvellous," which pushes him along the perilous, lonely pathway he has chosen. In the brief third letter, Walton tells his sister that his ship has set sail and that he has full confidence that he will achieve his aim.

Summary: Letter 4

In the fourth letter, the ship stalls between huge sheets of ice, and Walton and his men spot a sledge guided by a gigantic creature about half a mile away. The next morning, they encounter another sledge stranded on an ice floe. All but one of the dogs drawing the sledge is dead, and the man on the sledge—not the man seen the night before—is emaciated, weak, and starving. Despite his condition, the man refuses to board the ship until Walton tells him that it is heading north. The stranger spends two days recovering, nursed by the crew, before he can speak. The crew is burning with curiosity, but Walton, aware of the man's still-fragile state, prevents his men from burdening the stranger with questions. As time passes, Walton and the stranger become friends, and the stranger eventually consents to tell Walton his story. At the end of the fourth letter, Walton states that the visitor will commence his narrative the next day; Walton's framing narrative ends and the stranger's begins.

Summary: Chapter 1

The stranger, who the reader soon learns is Victor Frankenstein, begins his narration. He starts with his family background, birth, and early childhood, telling Walton about his father, Alphonse, and his mother, Caroline. Alphonse became Caroline's protector when her father, Alphonse's longtime friend Beaufort, died in poverty. They married two years later, and Victor was born soon after.

Frankenstein then describes how his childhood companion, Elizabeth Lavenza, entered his family. At this point in the narrative, the original (1818) and revised (1831) versions of *Frankenstein* diverge. In the original version, Elizabeth is Victor's cousin, the daughter of Alphonse's sister; when Victor is four years old, Elizabeth's mother dies and Elizabeth is adopted into the Frankenstein family. In the revised version, Elizabeth is discovered by Caroline, on a trip to Italy, when Victor is about five years old. While visiting a poor Italian family, Caroline notices a beautiful blonde girl among the dark-haired Italian children; upon discovering that Elizabeth is the orphaned daughter of a Milanese nobleman and a German woman and that the Italian family can barely afford to feed her, Caroline adopts Elizabeth and brings her back to Geneva. Victor's mother decides at the moment of the adoption that Elizabeth and Victor should someday marry.

Summary: Chapter 2

Elizabeth and Victor grow up together as best friends. Victor's friendship with Henry Clerval, a schoolmate and only child, flourishes as well, and he spends his childhood happily surrounded by this close domestic circle. As a teenager, Victor becomes increasingly fascinated by the mysteries of the natural world. He chances upon a book by Cornelius Agrippa, a sixteenth-century scholar of the

occult sciences, and becomes interested in natural philosophy. He studies the outdated findings of the alchemists Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Albertus Magnus with enthusiasm. He witnesses the destructive power of nature when, during a raging storm, lightning destroys a tree near his house. A modern natural philosopher accompanying the Frankenstein family explains to Victor the workings of electricity, making the ideas of the alchemists seem outdated and worthless. (In the 1818 version, a demonstration of electricity by his father convinces Victor of the alchemists' mistakenness.)

Summary: Chapter 3

At the age of seventeen, Victor leaves his family in Geneva to attend the university at Ingolstadt. Just before Victor departs, his mother catches scarlet fever from Elizabeth, whom she has been nursing back to health, and dies. On her deathbed, she begs Elizabeth and Victor to marry. Several weeks later, still grieving, Victor goes off to Ingolstadt.

Arriving at the university, he finds quarters in the town and sets up a meeting with a professor of natural philosophy, M. Krempe. Krempe tells Victor that all the time that Victor has spent studying the alchemists has been wasted, further souring Victor on the study of natural philosophy. He then attends a lecture in chemistry by a professor named Waldman. This lecture, along with a subsequent meeting with the professor, convinces Victor to pursue his studies in the sciences.

Summary: Chapter 4

Victor attacks his studies with enthusiasm and, ignoring his social life and his family far away in Geneva, makes rapid progress. Fascinated by the mystery of the creation of life, he begins to study how the human body is built (anatomy) and how it falls apart (death and decay). After several years of tireless work, he masters all that his professors have to teach him, and he goes one step further: discovering the secret of life.

Privately, hidden away in his apartment where no one can see him work, he decides to begin the construction of an animate creature, envisioning the creation of a new race of wonderful beings. Zealously devoting himself to this labor, he neglects everything else—family, friends, studies, and social life—and grows increasingly pale, lonely, and obsessed.

Summary: Chapter 5

One stormy night, after months of labor, Victor completes his creation. But when he brings it to life, its awful appearance horrifies him. He rushes to the next room and tries to sleep, but he is troubled by nightmares about Elizabeth and his mother's corpse. He wakes to discover the monster looming over his bed with a grotesque smile and rushes out of the house. He spends the night pacing in his courtyard. The next morning, he goes walking in the town of Ingolstadt, frantically avoiding a return to his now-haunted apartment.

As he walks by the town inn, Victor comes across his friend Henry Clerval, who has just arrived to begin studying at the university. Delighted to see Henry—a breath of fresh air and a reminder of his family after so many months of isolation and ill health—he brings him back to his apartment. Victor enters first and is relieved to find no sign of the monster. But, weakened by months of work and shock at the horrific being he has created, he immediately falls ill with a nervous fever that lasts several months. Henry nurses him back to health and, when Victor has recovered, gives him a letter from Elizabeth that had arrived during his illness.

Summary: Chapter 6

Elizabeth's letter expresses her concern about Victor's illness and entreats him to write to his family in Geneva as soon as he can. She also tells him that Justine Moritz, a girl who used to live with the Frankenstein family, has returned to their house following her mother's death.

After Victor has recovered, he introduces Henry, who is studying Oriental languages, to the professors at the university. The task is painful, however, since the sight of any chemical instrument worsens Victor's symptoms; even speaking to his professors torments him. He decides to return to Geneva and awaits a letter from his father specifying the date of his departure. Meanwhile, he and Henry take a walking tour through the country, uplifting their spirits with the beauties of nature.

Summary: Chapter 7

On their return to the university, Victor finds a letter from his father telling him that Victor's youngest brother, William, has been murdered. Saddened, shocked, and apprehensive, Victor departs immediately for Geneva. By the time he arrives, night has fallen and the gates of Geneva have been shut, so he spends the evening walking in the woods around the outskirts of the town. As he walks near the spot where his brother's body was found, he spies the monster lurking and becomes convinced that his creation is responsible for killing William. The next day, however, when he returns home, Victor learns that Justine has been accused of the murder. After the discovery of the body, a servant had found in Justine's pocket a picture of Caroline Frankenstein last seen in William's possession. Victor proclaims Justine's innocence, but the evidence against her seems irrefutable, and Victor refuses to explain himself for fear that he will be labeled insane.

Summary: Chapter 8

Justine confesses to the crime, believing that she will thereby gain salvation, but tells Elizabeth and Victor that she is innocent—and miserable. They remain convinced of her innocence, but Justine is soon executed. Victor becomes consumed with guilt, knowing that the monster he created and the cloak of secrecy within which the creation took place have now caused the deaths of two members of his family.

Summary: Chapter 9

After Justine's execution, Victor becomes increasingly melancholy. He considers suicide but restrains himself by thinking of Elizabeth and his father. Alphonse, hoping to cheer up his son, takes his children on an excursion to the family home at Belrive. From there, Victor wanders alone toward the valley of Chamounix. The beautiful scenery cheers him somewhat, but his respite from grief is short-lived.

Summary: Chapter 10

One rainy day, Victor wakes to find his old feelings of despair resurfacing. He decides to travel to the summit of Montanvert, hoping that the view of a pure, eternal, beautiful natural scene will revive his spirits.

When he reaches the glacier at the top, he is momentarily consoled by the sublime spectacle. As he crosses to the opposite side of the glacier, however, he spots a creature loping toward him at incredible speed. At closer range, he recognizes clearly the grotesque shape of the monster. He issues futile threats of attack to the monster, whose enormous strength and speed allow him to elude Victor easily. Victor curses him and tells him to go away, but the monster, speaking eloquently, persuades him to accompany him to a fire in a cave of ice. Inside the cave, the monster begins to narrate the events of his life.

Summary: Chapter 11

Sitting by the fire in his hut, the monster tells Victor of the confusion that he experienced upon being created. He describes his flight from Victor's apartment into the wilderness and his gradual acclimation to the world through his discovery of the sensations of light, dark, hunger, thirst, and cold. According to his story, one day he finds a fire and is pleased at the warmth it creates, but he becomes dismayed when he burns himself on the hot embers. He realizes that he can keep the fire alive by adding wood, and that the fire is good not only for heat and warmth but also for making food more palatable.

In search of food, the monster finds a hut and enters it. His presence causes an old man inside to shriek and run away in fear. The monster proceeds to a village, where more people flee at the sight of him. As a result of these incidents, he resolves to stay away from humans. One night he takes refuge in a small hovel adjacent to a cottage. In the morning, he discovers that he can see into the cottage through a crack in the wall and observes that the occupants are a young man, a young woman, and an old man.

Summary: Chapter 12

Observing his neighbors for an extended period of time, the monster notices that they often seem unhappy, though he is unsure why. He eventually realizes, however, that their despair results from their poverty, to which he has been contributing by surreptitiously stealing their food. Torn by his guilty conscience, he stops stealing their food and does what he can to reduce their hardship, gathering wood at night to leave at the door for their use.

The monster becomes aware that his neighbors are able to communicate with each other using strange sounds. Vowing to learn their language, he tries to match the sounds they make with the actions they perform. He acquires a basic knowledge of the language, including the names of the young man and woman, Felix and Agatha. He admires their graceful forms and is shocked by his ugliness when he catches sight of his reflection in a pool of water. He spends the whole winter in the hovel, unobserved and well protected from the elements, and grows increasingly affectionate toward his unwitting hosts.

Summary: Chapter 13

As winter thaws into spring, the monster notices that the cottagers, particularly Felix, seem unhappy. A beautiful woman in a dark dress and veil arrives at the cottage on horseback and asks to see Felix. Felix becomes ecstatic the moment he sees her. The woman, who does not speak the language of the cottagers, is named Safie. She moves into the cottage, and the mood of the household immediately brightens. As Safie learns the language of the cottagers, so does the monster. He also learns to read, and, since Felix uses Constantin-François de Volney's *Ruins of Empires* to instruct Safie, he learns a bit of world history in the process. Now able to speak and understand the language perfectly, the monster learns about human society by listening to the cottagers' conversations. Reflecting on his own situation, he realizes that he is deformed and alone. "Was I then a monster," he asks, "a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?" He also learns about the pleasures and obligations of the family and of human relations in general, which deepens the agony of his own isolation.

Summary: Chapter 14

After some time, the monster's constant eavesdropping allows him to reconstruct the history of the cottagers. The old man, De Lacey, was once an affluent and successful citizen in Paris; his children, Agatha and Felix, were well-respected members of the community. Safie's father, a Turk, was falsely accused of a crime and sentenced to death. Felix visited the Turk in prison and met his daughter, with whom he immediately fell in love. Safie sent Felix letters thanking him for his intention to help her father and recounting the circumstances of her plight (the monster tells Victor that he copied some of these letters and offers them as proof that his tale is true). The letters relate that Safie's mother was a Christian Arab who had been enslaved by the Turks before marrying her father. She inculcated in Safie an independence and intelligence that Islam prevented Turkish women from cultivating. Safie was eager to marry a European man and thereby escape the near-slavery that awaited her in Turkey. Felix successfully coordinated her father's escape from prison, but when the plot was discovered, Felix, Agatha, and De Lacey were exiled from France and stripped of their wealth. They then moved into the cottage in Germany upon which the monster has stumbled. Meanwhile, the Turk tried to force Safie to return to Constantinople with him, but she managed to escape with some money and the knowledge of Felix's whereabouts.

Summary: Chapter 15

While foraging for food in the woods around the cottage one night, the monster finds an abandoned leather satchel containing some clothes and books. Eager to learn more about the world than he can discover through the chink in the cottage wall, he brings the books back to his hovel and begins to read. The books include Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Sorrows of Werter*, a volume of Plutarch's *Lives*, and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the last of which has the most profound effect on the monster. Unaware that *Paradise Lost* is a work of imagination, he reads it as a factual history and finds much similarity between the story and his own situation. Rifling through the pockets of his own clothes, stolen long ago from Victor's apartment, he finds some papers from Victor's journal. With his newfound ability to read, he soon understands the horrific manner of his own creation and the disgust with which his creator regarded him.

Dismayed by these discoveries, the monster wishes to reveal himself to the cottagers in the hope that they will see past his hideous exterior and befriend him. He decides to approach the blind De Lacey first, hoping to win him over while Felix, Agatha, and Safie are away. He believes that De Lacey, unprejudiced against his hideous exterior, may be able to convince the others of his gentle nature.

The perfect opportunity soon presents itself, as Felix, Agatha, and Safie depart one day for a long walk. The monster nervously enters the cottage and begins to speak to the old man. Just as he begins to explain his situation, however, the other three return unexpectedly. Felix drives the monster away, horrified by his appearance.

Summary: Chapter 16

In the wake of this rejection, the monster swears to revenge himself against all human beings, his creator in particular. Journeying for months out of sight of others, he makes his way toward Geneva. On the way, he spots a young girl, seemingly alone; the girl slips into

a stream and appears to be on the verge of drowning. When the monster rescues the girl from the water, the man accompanying her, suspecting him of having attacked her, shoots him.

As he nears Geneva, the monster runs across Victor's younger brother, William, in the woods. When William mentions that his father is Alphonse Frankenstein, the monster erupts in a rage of vengeance and strangles the boy to death with his bare hands. He takes a picture of Caroline Frankenstein that the boy has been holding and places it in the folds of the dress of a girl sleeping in a barn—Justine Moritz, who is later executed for William's murder.

Having explained to Victor the circumstances behind William's murder and Justine's conviction, the monster implores Victor to create another monster to accompany him and be his mate.

Summary: Chapter 17

The monster tells Victor that it is his right to have a female monster companion. Victor refuses at first, but the monster appeals to Victor's sense of responsibility as his creator. He tells Victor that all of his evil actions have been the result of a desperate loneliness. He promises to take his new mate to South America to hide in the jungle far from human contact. With the sympathy of a fellow monster, he argues, he will no longer be compelled to kill. Convinced by these arguments, Victor finally agrees to create a female monster. Overjoyed but still skeptical, the monster tells Victor that he will monitor Victor's progress and that Victor need not worry about contacting him when his work is done.

Summary: Chapter 18

After his fateful meeting with the monster on the glacier, Victor puts off the creation of a new, female creature. He begins to have doubts about the wisdom of agreeing to the monster's request. He realizes that the project will require him to travel to England to gather information. His father notices that his spirits are troubled much of the time—Victor, still racked by guilt over the deaths of William and Justine, is now newly horrified by the task in which he is about to engage—and asks him if his impending marriage to Elizabeth is the source of his melancholy. Victor assures him that the prospect of marriage to Elizabeth is the only happiness in his life. Eager to raise Victor's spirits, Alphonse suggests that they celebrate the marriage immediately. Victor refuses, unwilling to marry Elizabeth until he has completed his obligation to the monster. He asks Alphonse if he can first travel to England, and Alphonse consents.

Victor and Alphonse arrange a two-year tour, on which Henry Clerval, eager to begin his studies after several years of unpleasant work for his father in Geneva, will accompany Victor. After traveling for a while, they reach London.

Summary: Chapter 19

Victor and Henry journey through England and Scotland, but Victor grows impatient to begin his work and free himself of his bond to the monster. Victor has an acquaintance in a Scottish town, with whom he urges Henry to stay while he goes alone on a tour of Scotland. Henry consents reluctantly, and Victor departs for a remote, desolate island in the Orkneys to complete his project.

Quickly setting up a laboratory in a small shack, Victor devotes many hours to working on his new creature. He often has trouble continuing his work, however, knowing how unsatisfying, even grotesque, the product of his labor will be.

Summary: Chapter 20

While working one night, Victor begins to think about what might happen after he finishes his creation. He imagines that his new creature might not want to seclude herself, as the monster had promised, or that the two creatures might have children, creating "a race of devils . . . on the earth." In the midst of these reflections and growing concern, Victor looks up to see the monster grinning at him through the window. Overcome by the monster's hideousness and the possibility of a second creature like him, he destroys his work in progress. The monster becomes enraged at Victor for breaking his promise, and at the prospect of his own continued solitude. He curses and vows revenge, then departs, swearing that he will be with Victor on his wedding night.

The following night, Victor receives a letter from Henry, who, tired of Scotland, suggests that they continue their travels. Before he leaves his shack, Victor cleans and packs his chemical instruments and collects the remains of his second creature. Late that evening, he rows out onto the ocean and throws the remains into the water, allowing himself to rest in the boat for a while. When he wakes, he

finds that the winds will not permit him to return to shore. Panicking, in fear for his life, he contemplates the possibility of dying at sea, blown far out into the Atlantic. Soon the winds change, however, and he reaches shore near a town. When he lands, a group of townspeople greet him rudely, telling him that he is under suspicion for a murder discovered the previous night.

Summary: Chapter 21

After confronting Victor, the townspeople take him to Mr. Kirwin, the town magistrate. Victor hears witnesses testify against him, claiming that they found the body of a man along the beach the previous night and that, just before finding the body, they saw a boat in the water that resembled Victor's. Mr. Kirwin decides to bring Victor to look at the body to see what effect it has on him: if Victor is the murderer, perhaps he will react with visible emotion. When Victor sees the body, he does indeed react with horror, for the victim is Henry Clerval, with the black marks of the monster's hands around his neck. In shock, Victor falls into convulsions and suffers a long illness.

Victor remains ill for two months. Upon his recovery, he finds himself still in prison. Mr. Kirwin, now compassionate and much more sympathetic than before Victor's illness, visits him in his cell. He tells him that he has a visitor, and for a moment Victor fears that the monster has come to cause him even more misery. The visitor turns out to be his father, who, upon hearing of his son's illness and the death of his friend, rushed from Geneva to see him.

Victor is overjoyed to see his father, who stays with him until the court, having nothing but circumstantial evidence, finds him innocent of Henry's murder. After his release, Victor departs with his father for Geneva.

Summary: Chapter 22

On their way home, father and son stop in Paris, where Victor rests to recover his strength. Just before leaving again for Geneva, Victor receives a letter from Elizabeth. Worried by Victor's recurrent illnesses, she asks him if he is in love with another, to which Victor replies that she is the source of his joy. The letter reminds him of the monster's threat that he will be with Victor on his wedding night. He believes that the monster intends to attack him and resolves that he will fight back. Whichever one of them is destroyed, his misery will at last come to an end.

Eventually, Victor and his father arrive home and begin planning the wedding. Elizabeth is still worried about Victor, but he assures her that all will be well after the wedding. He has a terrible secret, he tells her, that he can only reveal to her after they are married. As the wedding day approaches, Victor grows more and more nervous about his impending confrontation with the monster. Finally, the wedding takes place, and Victor and Elizabeth depart for a family cottage to spend the night.

Summary: Chapter 23

In the evening, Victor and Elizabeth walk around the grounds, but Victor can think of nothing but the monster's imminent arrival. Inside, Victor worries that Elizabeth might be upset by the monster's appearance and the battle between them. He tells her to retire for the night. He begins to search for the monster in the house, when suddenly he hears Elizabeth scream and realizes that it was never his death that the monster had been intending this night. Consumed with grief over Elizabeth's death, Victor returns home and tells his father the gruesome news. Shocked by the tragic end of what should have been a joyous day, his father dies a few days later. Victor finally breaks his secrecy and tries to convince a magistrate in Geneva that an unnatural monster is responsible for the death of Elizabeth, but the magistrate does not believe him. Victor resolves to devote the rest of his life to finding and destroying the monster.

Summary: Chapter 24

His whole family destroyed, Victor decides to leave Geneva and the painful memories it holds behind him forever. He tracks the monster for months, guided by slight clues, messages, and hints that the monster leaves for him. Angered by these taunts, Victor continues his pursuit into the ice and snow of the North. There he meets Walton and tells his story. He entreats Walton to continue his search for vengeance after he is dead.

Summary: Walton, in Continuation

Walton then regains control of the narrative, continuing the story in the form of further letters to his sister. He tells her that he believes in the truth of Victor's story. He laments that he did not know Victor, who remains on the brink of death, in better days.

One morning, Walton's crewmen enter his cabin and beg him to promise that they will return to England if they break out of the ice in which they have been trapped ever since the night they first saw the monster's sledge. Victor speaks up, however, and convinces the men that the glory and honor of their quest should be enough motivation for them to continue toward their goal. They are momentarily moved, but two days later they again entreat Walton, who consents to the plan of return.

Just before the ship is set to head back to England, Victor dies. Several days later, Walton hears a strange sound coming from the room in which Victor's body lies. Investigating the noise, Walton is startled to find the monster, as hideous as Victor had described, weeping over his dead creator's body. The monster begins to tell him of all his sufferings. He says that he deeply regrets having become an instrument of evil and that, with his creator dead, he is ready to die. He leaves the ship and departs into the darkness.