

DISCUSSION GUIDE

FRANKENSTEIN

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

You can run this session cold. Read the primer below once, and each question comes with facilitation notes, likely student responses, and a text anchor so you can point students back to a specific scene. The timings add up to 45 minutes; the middle three blocks are where the real work happens, so protect them. Nothing here requires slides. A board or a shared doc is enough.

One warning specific to this book. Almost everyone in the room, including possibly you, arrives knowing a version of *Frankenstein* that came from films rather than from the novel. That gap is not an obstacle to the discussion. It **is** the discussion, and the session is built to use it.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW GOING IN

An explorer named Robert Walton, pushing north through Arctic ice, pulls a dying man off the floes and writes down his story. The man is **Victor Frankenstein**, a young Genevan who went to university at Ingolstadt, learned everything the science of his day could teach him, and spent two years secretly assembling a human body from dissecting rooms, slaughterhouses, and graves. One November night he brings it to life. He looks at what he has made, is horrified, and runs out of the room.

The creature is left to raise itself. It has the body of an adult and the mind of a newborn. Hiding beside a poor family's cottage for more than a year, it teaches itself to speak and read by watching them, and works out what it is. Every attempt it makes at human contact ends in disgust or violence. It finally comes back to Victor with one request: make me a companion like myself, and we will both disappear. Victor agrees, begins, then destroys her half-finished. The creature answers by killing everyone Victor loves, one at a time: his young brother William, his closest friend Henry Clerval, and finally his cousin and bride Elizabeth on their wedding night. Along the way a family servant, Justine, is tried and hanged for William's murder while Victor stays silent,

knowing she is innocent. The chase ends where the book began, on the ice. Victor dies aboard Walton's ship. The creature appears, grieves over the body of the man who would not look at him, and leaves to destroy itself.

Three ideas run underneath the story, and the discussion turns on them:

- **The disaster is not the experiment.** Victor is never punished for making the creature. The science works. Everything that follows comes from what he does ninety seconds later, which is leave the room, and from his repeating that choice every time he is given another chance.
- **Nobody is born a monster.** The creature begins gentle, curious, and generous. It becomes violent only after every attempt at connection is met with horror. Mary Shelley's father, the philosopher William Godwin, argued that people are made by their circumstances; his daughter built the hardest possible test of that claim, and then refused to let it excuse murder.
- **The real scientific problem is the mind, not the body.** Bones and muscle can survive a long time without blood. The brain cannot. That gap, not any general rule against making life, is where the novel actually breaks.

A note on the text: *this packet uses the 1818 first edition. In the 1831 revision Elizabeth is an unrelated foundling rather than Victor's cousin. If a student mentions this, they are not wrong; they read a different version.*

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THE SESSION

1. OPEN

(5 MINUTES)

Put this on the board before anyone talks: **“Frankenstein is a warning about science going too far.”** Ask for a show of hands, agree or disagree, no discussion yet. Most rooms will agree, and agree confidently.

Then tell them one fact and stop: in this novel, the experiment succeeds, and Victor is never punished for performing it. Say that by the end of class they are going to decide what the book is actually warning about.

Facilitation note: do not resolve the hook now, and do not let an eager student resolve it for you. You are planting it so the final block can pay it off.

2. WHO IS THE CREATURE, AND WHERE DID HE COME FROM?

(8 MINUTES)

Ask: The creature teaches himself to speak, read, and argue, by hiding beside a cottage for more than a year while nobody ever says a word to him. What kind of person is he at the start, and what changes him?

Text anchor: the long sequence where the creature lives concealed beside the De Lacey family, and the scene where he finally speaks to the blind old man.

What students should surface: he starts out gentle and curious. He gathers firewood for the family in secret because he sees they are poor. He saves a girl from drowning and is shot for it. When he finally speaks to old De Lacey, who is blind, the old man is kind to him, right up until the sighted members of the family walk in and drive him out. That scene is the proof: the problem is never anything he has done. It is what he looks like.

Follow-up if the room is quiet: What is the last thing that happens to him before he becomes violent? Work back until someone reaches the rejection at the cottage, or Victor breaking the promise of a companion.

3. WHERE DOES THE DISASTER ACTUALLY BEGIN?

(10 MINUTES)

Ask: The experiment works. The creature lives. So where exactly does this story go wrong?

Text anchor: the night of the animation, and Victor’s response to it.

What students should surface: Victor looks at the living person he has made and runs. He never teaches it anything, never feeds it, never names it. Then he does the same thing again and again: he says nothing while Justine is tried and executed for a murder he knows the creature committed; he breaks his promise to build a companion; he keeps the whole thing secret until every person he loves is dead. Given roughly a dozen chances to take responsibility, he chooses flight every time.

Follow-up, and this is the one worth spending time on: What would he have had to do instead? Push past “not build it.” The answer the novel keeps pointing at is: stay. The creature wakes up needing to be taught, fed, protected, and given a place in the world, and Victor treats creation as a job that ended when the thing moved.

4. THE SCIENCE: WHICH PART COULD NEVER WORK?

(10 MINUTES)

Ask: Victor collects his materials from graves and dissecting rooms. Which part of that project is the real scientific impossibility?

Text anchor: Victor’s description of gathering materials, and his admission that he built the creature about eight feet tall because working at normal human scale was too slow.

What students should surface, and you can supply these numbers directly: the answer is the brain, and it is not close. When the heart stops, consciousness is gone in about eight seconds, and sustained loss of blood flow causes brain damage and then brain death within a few minutes. Compare the kidney used in the

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first successful human transplant in 1954, which spent 82 minutes with no blood supply and then worked normally. Bone and muscle are tougher still. Victor's material has been dead for days, so the honest version of his experiment is a body that moves and a mind that is gone. A second problem: a body assembled from many different people would be attacked by its own immune system, which is why that 1954 transplant had to be done between identical twins.

Follow-up, and students enjoy this one: ask what a defibrillator does. Most will say it restarts a stopped heart. It does close to the opposite; it stops a heart beating chaotically so the heart's own pacemaker can resume, and a flat line is specifically not shockable. The belief that electricity turns death back into life is two hundred years old, and this novel is part of why.

5. THE OPEN QUESTION

(8 MINUTES)

Ask: The creature says, "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend." Does that excuse what he does?

This one is genuinely open and you should not steer it to a verdict. Let the room split.

What students should surface on both sides: those saying it does not excuse him have the strongest

single fact available, which is that his first victim is a child who has done nothing, and that he then plants evidence on a sleeping woman and lets her hang. Those saying it partly excuses him should be pushed to distinguish between explaining something and forgiving it.

Facilitation note: block the slogan. Somebody will say "the real monster is Victor," which sounds like an answer and ends the conversation in thirty seconds. Ask them what the creature owes Justine. The strongest card on the table is that the creature does not think he is excused either; he ends the novel intending to destroy himself.

6. CLOSE

(4 MINUTES)

Go back to the sentence on the board. Ask for the show of hands again, and ask what has changed.

Where to land: the novel is not warning us against building things. It is asking what a maker owes the thing it has made once that thing turns out to be a person. The version everyone walked in with, do not go too far, arrives from the 1931 film, which also gives the creature a criminal brain by mistake so that it is born bad. That single change reverses the book's entire argument. Mary Shelley wrote the opposite: he is not born bad, and the hard part was never the building.

IF YOU HAVE EXTRA TIME

The letter exercise, roughly 10 minutes, and the best of these three. In 1992 a reader wrote to the *New York Times* attacking genetically modified crops and coined the word "Frankenfood." His sentence: "Ever since Mary Shelley's baron rolled his improved human out of the lab, scientists have been bringing just such good things to life. If they want to sell us Frankenfood, perhaps it's time to gather the villagers, light some torches and head to the castle." Ask the class to find every mistake about the novel. There are four. Victor is not a baron; there is no laboratory in the book; the creature is not an improvement and Victor never says it is; and there are no torch-bearing villagers and no castle anywhere in the novel. Then ask the real question: the word worked anyway, and helped shape a real argument about real food regulation. What does

it mean that a story can change the world through a version of itself that nobody checked?

The female creature, roughly 8 minutes. Victor destroys her before she is finished. His stated fears are that she might refuse the bargain, or breed. Ask: whose consent is missing from that whole negotiation? Two beings argue over whether to make a third, and nobody asks her anything, because she is destroyed before she can be asked.

Who is telling this story, roughly 5 minutes. Walton's letters contain Victor's account, which contains the creature's. The only version that explains rather than accuses is buried two layers deep, and you can only reach it by going through two men who are frightened of him. Ask why the author would bury the most sympathetic account the deepest.