

A First for Frankenstein

On a rainy day in Switzerland, in 1816, an eighteen-year-old woman created a monster. The woman was Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. The monster was Frankenstein's monster, the central character in a tale that is often described as the first science fiction story ever written.

Mary and her friends were on vacation when the weather trapped them inside. They challenged each other to a story contest to pass the time. Mary's story, about a monster made from human parts, took on a life of its own. Still read today, it spawned a whole new genre of tales that push the limits of science and the boundaries of imagination.

Mary found inspiration for her story in many places. It is said that one particularly stormy night, the group had a discussion about the work of an Italian scientist, Luigi Galvani. Galvani used electrical charges to cause muscle twitches in dead frogs. With lightning striking outside, the group talked about whether it was possible to use electricity to bring things back to life. This idea took root in Mary's mind.

Mary was also influenced by works of art, including the book *Paradise Lost* and the painting *The Nightmare*. She drew from previous travels, naming the doctor in her book after a castle that she visited in Germany. The castle was the home of a German alchemist who was said to do experiments with

corpses. It is not hard to see the connection that Mary made with her character, Dr. Frankenstein, who used corpses to create his monster.

All of these influences were swimming in Mary's head when she went to sleep on the night of the story contest. She had a vivid dream. The dream became the basis for the tale of Frankenstein, and her original short story eventually became chapter four in her novel, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, which was published in 1818.

The story of Frankenstein is sometimes called a horror story. After all, the main character is a monster. But, as Mary wrote in her personal notes, the story goes deeper than that. It starts from the scientific discoveries of the time period. It explores the idea of whether all that is scientifically possible is ethically correct. Just because you can do it, does that mean that you should? It also considers the motivation of the scientist. In Mary's tale, the monster himself is not a bad creation. He only turns bad when Dr. Frankenstein mistreats him, and when others misunderstand him.

Mary's words provide entertainment, but they also give the reader a lot to think about. Modern science fiction continues to explore these themes. If you enjoy reading science fiction, you can thank Mary and her monster!



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____

1. How old was Mary Shelley when she first wrote the story of Frankenstein?
 - a. 16
 - b. 18
 - c. 20
 - d. 32

2. Which of the following was NOT mentioned as an influence for Mary's story?
 - a. The book *Paradise Lost*
 - b. Mary's dreams
 - c. The painting *Night Sky*
 - d. Mary's travels

3. Which of the following aspects of Frankenstein do NOT make the case for it to be considered a science fiction story?
 - a. It explores the motivation of scientists
 - b. It features a monster
 - c. It explores the limits of scientific technology at the time it was written
 - d. It features a scientist/inventor

4. How might the weather have contributed to the creation of Frankenstein?
 - a. It kept the friends inside
 - b. It inspired the story contest
 - c. The lightning made them think about electricity
 - d. All of the above

Instructions for teachers:

These questions can be used to assess understanding of the reading passage.

The item in bold is the correct answer for each question.

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