MARY SHELLEY (1797 – 1851)

Daughter of William Godwin & Mary Wollstonecraft, both pretty famous & controversial figures in their time…

- **William Godwin:** radical leftist/anarchist, atheist, saw most societal institutions as inherently oppressive and selfish, including marriage. Nevertheless he agreed to marry Mary Wollstonecraft because he loved her and it was important to her. Originally Mary Shelley dedicated *Frankenstein* to her father, which earned her some negative criticism right away because of how controversial he was.
- **Mary Wollstonecraft:** one of the earliest great feminist writers, famous for writing *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which lays out the argument for why women should be given the same rights as men, particularly the right to a good education. She died from an infection shortly after giving birth to Mary. Her death was the first big tragic loss in Mary Shelley's life… but it definitely wouldn't be the last.
  - o Mary Shelley herself was more of a centrist & tried to stay out of politics, especially later in life, but of course she was still influenced by her parents and their social circle.

Her father remarried a few years after her mother's death, because he felt that Mary and her half-sister Fanny should have a mother figure in their life & he didn't feel suited to raising children by himself. (So yeah, the guy who didn't believe in marriage ended up getting married twice. Ironic.) Mary Shelley was always very close to her father, but didn't get along well with her stepmother and stepsister Jane.

Mary loved reading & writing as a child, and her father encouraged her. She also got to meet a lot of famous writers, philosophers & scientists because they knew her father. Once when she was a kid, she and Jane stayed up late and hid behind a sofa so that they could listen to the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge recite his masterpiece, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a poem that would have a huge influence on Mary Shelley's own writing, including *Frankenstein*. (Put a pin in that.)

When Mary was about 16, she met the passionate young poet **Percy Bysshe Shelley** (19), who was a massive William Godwin fanboy. He also was already married to a girl named Harriet. Despite that, however, Percy & Mary hit it off and ended up hooking up, which Mary's dad did not approve of. Percy basically abandoned his first wife, and he & Mary (and also Jane, the awkward third wheel) ended up going on a long trip all around Europe, partly for fun and partly to escape from the drama.

In 1815, Mary got pregnant; sadly, the baby was born premature and died. Later she wrote in her journal that she had a dream that her baby wasn't really dead, but she set it by the fire and warmed it up, and it came back to life. Creepy. (Probably not significant to *Frankenstein* at all, nope, definitely not…)

In 1816, when Mary was 19 years old, they went to hang out with Percy's buddy Lord Byron, another Romantic poet known for being a bit of an eccentric playboy. Byron had a vacation home in Geneva, and they all went there to hang out for the summer – Percy, Mary, Mary's stepsister Jane, and also another friend named Polidori, who was a physician. Jane, who had now decided to change her name to "Claire" for some reason, ended up hooking up with Byron during this time because of course she did.

- They were stuck inside for several days because the weather was terrible and rainy. So Byron suggested that they should all entertain themselves by writing ghost stories. (Fun fact: Polidori wrote a vampire story that would later go on to influence *Dracula*. Pretty neat.)
- Everyone else came up with stories, but Mary had super bad writer's block. Then one evening she was listening to Percy & Byron talking about some current-day science stuff, specifically **galvanism**, this new scientific theory that you could animate corpses using electricity. They wondered if maybe you could even bring dead people back to life. (This was a real thing scientists were experimenting with back then!)
- The whole idea of this kinda freaked Mary out, and when she went to bed that night she ended up having a crazy creepy dream about a young scientist piecing together a corpse and bringing it to life, only to then get scared and run away, and later wake up in his bed and see the creature standing over him.
- She woke up in terror, like "Dang! If only I could come up with a story as scary as that dream… Hey, wait!" So she wrote a story based on her nightmare, and everyone loved it.
- She only meant it to be a short story at first, but Percy encouraged her to expand it into a whole novel and get it published.

Frankenstein was first published 1918, and Mary declined to put her name on it, instead publishing it anonymously. However, since it was dedicated to William Godwin, and since Percy Shelley was already both a well-known writer and Godwin fanboy, a lot of people assumed that *he* had written it.

- It didn't get super great reviews at the time, partially because some critics had a bias against both Godwin and Percy Shelley due to their politics. Other people said the prose was garbage, or it was grotesque and tasteless, etc.
- However, even though the critics were harsh on it, it got very popular among the general public.

Meanwhile, stuff was happening in Mary Shelley's life. Between 1916 and 1923, Mary lost two more kids (a son and daughter) and also had another miscarriage; her fourth son was the only one of her kids to actually survive. Then, Percy's ex-wife Harriet committed suicide, and so did Mary's half-sister Fanny. And *then*, Percy himself drowned in an unfortunate boating accident in 1822.

Mary later released a new, slightly revised version of *Frankenstein,* and this time she actually put her name on it and wrote an introduction explaining how she'd come up with the story. Many people were shocked to find out that such a horrific story had been written by a woman, especially one so young.

She wrote other things later, but of course *Frankenstein* was always her most popular work. In a way, the book itself is kind of her own monstrous creation that took on a life of its own. In 1823 it was first adapted into a stage play, and ever since it has been reprinted dozens of times, and has been adapted into tons of plays, movies, and other media.

ROMANTICISM

Mary & Percy Shelley both belonged to a movement called **Romanticism.** The Romantic Era was a period in the early/mid 1800s where art, literature, politics and philosophy took a drastic turn away from

the rational-minded secularism of the Enlightenment (1700s) and more toward an ideology that valued emotion, imagination and individualism.

The Romantic movement was kind of a rebellion against the super-practical, super-rational ideologies of the previous era. It sought to overthrow many formal traditions that had become stale and lifeless, and it valued democratic equality over more traditional power hierarchies (e.g. kings & nobility).

Romanticism was also a direct response to the rise of industrialization and urbanization. The Romantics felt that modern technology and living in cities had caused people to become corrupted, to lose touch with their pure spiritual selves. They believed that the best way to try to regain this lost innocence was to get away from society and try to connect with nature.

A few common themes tend to show up in a lot of Romantic works:

- **Sensationalism:** trying to achieve heightened emotional states through art; the belief that the deepest spiritual truths of the universe could only be discovered through emotional encounters with what they called the "sublime"
    o **Sublime:** anything that generates the strongest, most intense emotional sensations, to the point that its almost a religious experience. Awe, dread, beauty, danger – stuff that's both scary and thrilling. Something like a thunderstorm, a tiger, or the vast expanse of space: both beautiful and terrifying at the same time.
- **Nature**: a big source of emotional/spiritual mysticism, and the main way to experience the "sublime." Romantics often sought to escape into nature to find themselves and get away from the corruption of modern society.
- **Innocence vs. Corruption:** the belief that everyone starts off in a state of pure innocence, but gets corrupted over time. Romantics tended to believe that the ideal state of humanity is out in nature, but modern life has kind of ruined us.
- **Individualism:** or as the American Romantics would put it, "self-reliance" – the ideal of a loner hero (explorer, scientist, artist, thinker) who is super passionate and dirven by ambitious desires.
    o A lot of Romantic works featured a type of antihero protagonist now known as the **Byronic Hero** (named after Percy & Mary's buddy Byron, because he liked to use the trop so much in his stories, and also because he basically *was* this type of character in real life). The Byronic Hero is usually a dark, mysterious loner with some kind of terrible secret and/or tragic backstory; they tend to walk right on the edge between heroes and villains, often do some morally questionable things, and also brood a lot. Also they are super sexy most of the time (though there are some exceptions). Think: Batman, Prince Zuko, or pretty much any vampire ever.

Out of the Romantic Movement, there also emerged another literary trend: basically a dark spinoff of Romanticism called **GOTHIC.**

- The word "Gothic" has gone through a weird evolution over time. It originally referred to the Goths, a Germanic tribe that contributed to the fall of Rome. Later, a new style of architecture rose up in France during theMiddle Ages, and it came to be known as "Gothic architecture" because it was seen as barbaric and/or was influenced by the style of buildings that the Goths

built after conquering Rome. Then later, the term became associated with creepy ghost stories, because so many of these "Gothic Novels" took place in old Gothic-style castles and cathedrals.

- o The term now refers to anything with a general kind of dark & creepy aesthetic.
- Gothic novels were *crazy* popular back in the early 1800s, even though they were seen as silly garbage by a lot of critics (and, tbh, a lot of them *were* kinda silly garbage). These novels focused on a lot of the same stuff you can find in other Romantic works, but with a dark twist.
  - o Lots of creepy castles/mansions/abbeys/etc. Also *lots of spooky forests*. Settings tended to be either out in nature, or in old, decrepit buildings leftover from an earlier, more "magical" era (like the Middle Ages).
  - o Lots of characters who are isolated, imprisoned, dealing with madness, haunted by past sins (sometimes *literally*), obsessive – the dark side of individualism.
  - o Lots of murder, death, terror, madness – trying to evoke intense emotions of fear & dread in the reader, **"anxiety with no possibility of escape"**
  - o Most of these stories also usually had something supernatural going on.
- Examples of famous Gothic writers include: Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne (*The House of Seven Gables*), Gaston Leroux (*Phantom of the Opera*), the Brontë sisters (*Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights*), Bram Stoker (*Dracula*), Robert Louis Stevenson (*Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*), Shirley Jackson (*The Haunting of Hill House*), and of course Mary Shelley.

Frankenstein has most typical elements of the Romantic era: an individualistic protagonist, sensational emotions, the theme of innocence vs. corruption, and NATURE – so much nature. It also of course fits pretty neatly in the Gothic genre, with its dark atmosphere & emphasis on feelings of horror, isolation, obsession, madness, & *anxiety with no possibility of escape.*

- However, it's also different from most Gothic literature at the time, because instead of the horrors being rooted in the supernatural (ghosts, vampires, demons, etc), the horror is instead rooted in *science*. There's nothing supernatural at all; it's pure human.
- Which is why many people also classify this book as the first **science fiction novel.**

WORKS THAT INFLUENCED MARY SHELLEY…

While there are a *lot* of works that influenced Mary Shelley's writing of *Frankenstein*, there are three stories in particular whose influence is ALL OVER this book:

1. **The myth of Prometheus –** The secondary title of *Frankenstein* is "The Modern Prometheus," and for a good reason. Prometheus was a Titan god of Greek mythology. There are a couple of stories about him, both significant to *Frankenstein.* In one story, Prometheus creates a new race of people out of clay. In another story, Prometheus steals fire from the gods and gives it to humans, and as punishment he is cursed to be tied to a rock and have his liver pecked out by birds every day, only for it to then grow back the next day. Many Romantic writers (including Percy Shelley) really loved Prometheus; to them, he became kind of a symbol of the tortured creative genius who strove for greatness, but whose ambitions backfired horribly.

2. **Paradise Lost** – An epic poem by John Milton that's basically a fanfiction based on the Biblical creation story about the Garden of Eden. We'll talk more about *Paradise Lost* later when we get to the middle of the book; for now, just keep in mind that this one is important.
3. **The Rime of the Ancient Mariner** – A poem by another Romantic writer, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Allegedly, Mary Shelley got to hear Coleridge himself recite this poem when she was just a little girl, and it really stuck with her. The poem tells the story of a Mariner whose ship gets stranded in the South Pole, but is led to safety by an albatross (a giant sea-bird considered to be good luck). However, the Mariner decides to shoot the albatross, and as a result he brings a curse upon himself. His entire crew dies and comes back as zombies, but he himself can't die no matter how exhausted and thirsty he gets; he's also forced to wear the dead albatross around his neck as a symbol of his sin against nature. He goes through a huge ordeal where he's stranded at sea with his undead crew, being stalked by a demon of the ocean, and only barely makes it back to land before his ship is swallowed up in a giant whirlpool. He then is doomed to spend the rest of his days traveling through the land, telling his story to random people as a warning for them not to make the same mistakes he did.
   a. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'*s influence is especially prominent here at the beginning of the book.
      i. First off, both stories begin with a **frame tale**, a device where you set up your story within another story. Think like in the movie *The Princess Bride*, where it starts off with the grandfather reading the story to his grandson: that's a frame tale. *Frankenstein*'s frame tale of course is Robert Walton's letters to his sister. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* also begins with a frame tale, where a man is just trying to get to a wedding when he's suddenly stopped by the Mariner, who starts to tell him his story.
      ii. Second, the settings are similar. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the Mariner and his crew get lost in the South Pole; in *Frankenstein*, Walton is headed toward the North Pole.
      iii. Walton even makes a direct reference to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* when he reassures his sister that he won't be shooting any albatrosses.
      iv. Victor's rough, haunted appearance and his urgent desire to tell his story to Walton, as a warning not to follow in his footsteps, is also reminiscent of the Mariner in the poem.
      v. Like the Mariner in the poem, Victor is also someone who made a terrible mistake, and has been paying the price for it ever since…

This opening with Walton's letters sets up one of the big themes of the novel: **the desire to "conquer nature,"** and how that can backfire horribly. Walton is in many ways a typical individualistic Romantic Hero, hoping to explore parts of the earth that no one's ever seen and "penetrate the secrets of nature." He's so consumed with this quest that he doesn't even care about his own life or the lives of his crew.

- When Victor realizes this about him, his immediate reaction is "Oh no, not you too!" Victor clearly sees a lot of himself in Walton… *and that's not a good thing*. He's afraid Walton is about to go down a similar path that he himself did, and he starts telling him his story as a way of hopefully changing his mind.