

# THE HISTORY OF FRANKENSTEIN



Mary Shelley's novel, FRANKENSTEIN, first appeared in 1818. Since then the story has been retold and adapted for the stage, on film, on radio, on television and in comics. There is something about the story which fascinates people, despite the fact that many confuse the name of Victor Frankenstein with the creature that he created. This guide will examine what it is that has kept people's interest over the years. Is Frankenstein simply a horror story or is it more complex than that?

The first ever Frankenstein film appeared in 1910 but it is the 1931 version, starring Boris Karloff and directed by James Whale which really set the Frankenstein film genre in motion.

## **Task**

In film reference books, look for a picture both of the creature and also of Frankenstein himself. Try to find out the story told in this film. You could also try to find a short retelling of Mary Shelley's story. In one or both of these, look at the settings of the story. Look at the ways in which the creature is portrayed.

Can you find any recent comic versions of the story? Again, how is the creature portrayed? What do the settings look like?

A very early critic of the novel stated that once we had experienced the shocks of the story there was nothing else to interest us. However, the number of different versions and variations of the story show that there is something which fascinates both audiences and filmmakers.

**Task**

*Below is a selection of titles from the many Frankenstein films that have been made. Look at each title and see if you can come up with some idea as to what happens in each film.*

*THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN*

*THE CURSE OF FRANKENSTEIN*

*DR. FRANKENSTEIN ON CAMPUS*

*BLACKENSTEIN*

*THE EVIL OF FRANKENSTEIN*

*FRANKENSTEIN AND THE MONSTER FROM HELL*

*FRANKENSTEIN CREATED WOMAN*

*FRANKENSTEIN MUST BE DESTROYED*

*GHOST OF FRANKENSTEIN*

*I WAS A TEENAGE FRANKENSTEIN*

After you have done this, look in a film reference book to try to find out what actually did happen in each of these films. How close were you in your guesses?

The new version of FRANKENSTEIN made by Kenneth Branagh, is entitled MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN. Why do you think that he has chosen this title? What does it suggest about the film? Why not call it simply FRANKENSTEIN?

Anyone coming to see the film will have expectations about it. What do you think they would be? What are you expecting from the film?

The subtitle of Mary Shelley's novel is THE MODERN PROMETHEUS. Find out about the myth of Prometheus. How does the myth add to our understanding of the story of Frankenstein?

# GENRE

The work that you have completed on the different titles of FRANKENSTEIN films will show that you are able to predict what might happen in films. All of the films listed on page 1 will have certain similarities and differences. Our pleasure in watching a film comes partly from trying to predict what will happen in it, based on our experiences of stories that we have either read or seen, and having our predictions either confirmed or surprised. We look to the genre of a film or novel as a guide. Genre is a term which groups films together by way of their similarities. Each genre consists of a range of elements that allows us to recognise it and also to expect certain things to occur within it. These elements are commonly called 'conventions. So, if we say that we like westerns or sit-coms, then people will know what we are talking about. We share certain expectations of certain 'genres'. (See the 'Genre' concept guide on the Film Education website [www.filmeducation.org](http://www.filmeducation.org), for further detail on genre.)

When we talk about the film MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN, we are, in fact, talking about a number of different genres being used in one story. Let's look at the various genres. MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN could be described as:

A HORROR STORY

A LOVESTORY

A PERIOD FILM (i.e. a film set in the past)

AN ADAPTATION

A FRANKENSTEIN STORY

A SCIENCE-FICTION STORY

Our expectations of each of these genres will be different. We will expect different conventions to be used with each genre. Conventions are really collections of ideas that we all share about certain genres. We probably would not see all of the conventions in one film, but we would expect to see quite a few of them and would be disappointed if we did not. In many ways our pleasure in a media text comes partly from knowing what might come next whilst also coming up with other ideas as to the possible outcome of events.

Our own expectations will be different for each genre.

## **Task**

Can you describe your own expectations of a story in each of the genres listed above? What sort of characters would

you expect to find, what would the settings be? What situations would you expect to find? In the case of an adaptation, what sort of comparisons would you be making? Can you think of other films which you have seen which fit into these genres? How does MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN compare to these other films?

Thus, we have looked at the 'conventions' associated with film genres. Further than this, we also recognise certain themes within certain genres. Thus, we would expect a police film to deal with the ideas of law and order.

### ***Task***

*Look again at the list of genres which could be associated with MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN. What are the themes that you would associate with each of these genres? (you might not be able to do this for every genre).*

Let us now briefly consider each genre mentioned on page 2 and see how MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN uses them.

## **A HORROR STORY**

Look carefully at your expectations of a horror story. As a member of an audience, what emotions would you expect it to arouse in you? How might it do this? Which elements of MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN arouse the emotions of the audience? Try to list the various scenes where Branagh uses the horror' approach.

Because individual genres change over the years, the idea of 'horror' also changes. Ask someone who is older than 40 how they would define a horror film. Now compare this to the way that you have defined your expectations.

# A LOVE STORY

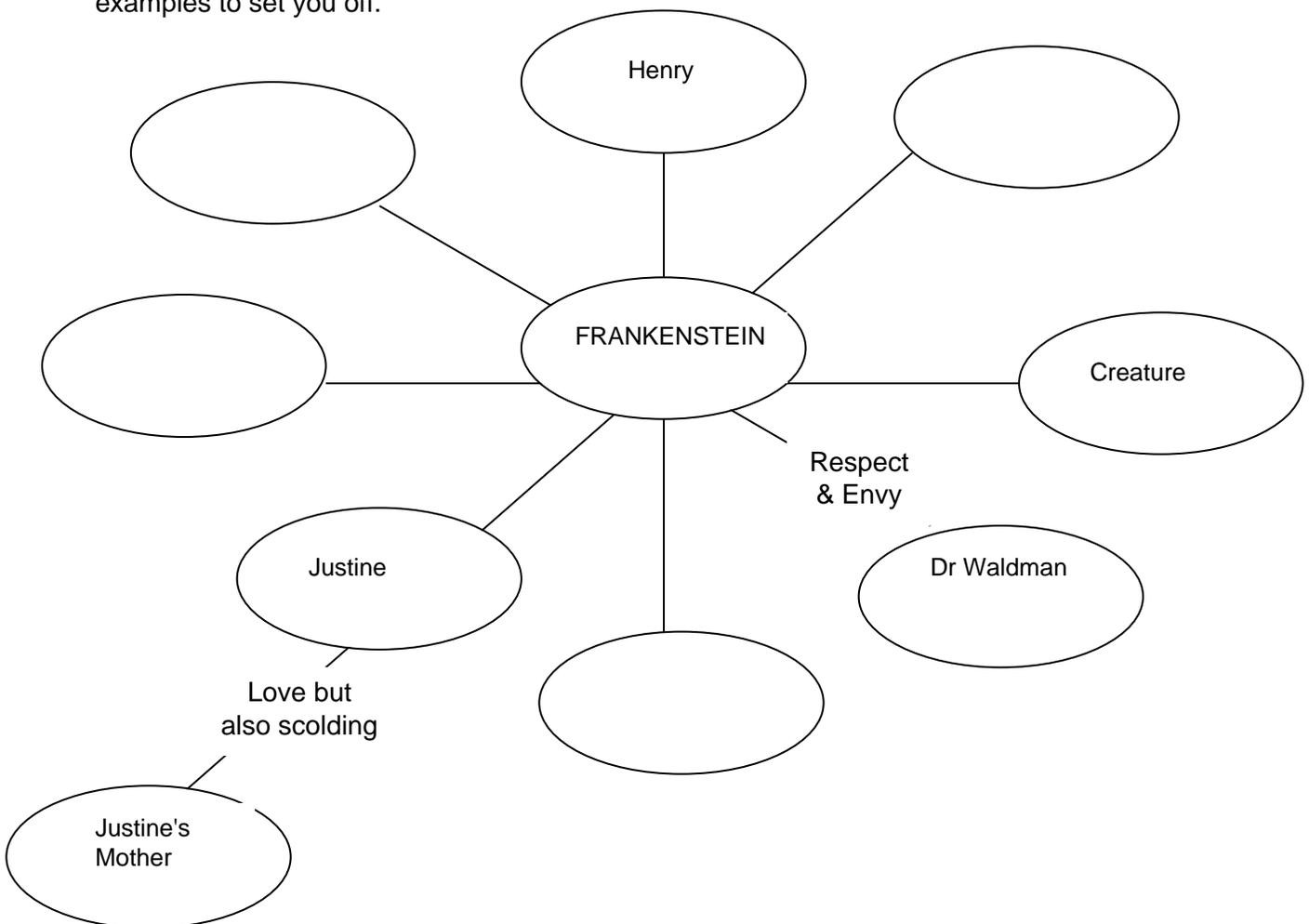
Whilst MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN certainly deals with the horror of Frankenstein's creation and the hatred and tragedy that ensues, it also deals with the reverse side of hate - love.

## **Task**

Think of all of the examples of love that are shown in the film - this could also include friendship. For each example, say how successful the relationship is. What obstacles are put in the way of each relationship? Are the obstacles overcome?

How are all of the relationships linked together and how do they affect each other?

Frankenstein stands at the centre of these relationships. In the chart below, try to link together the other characters, showing further relationships which might go beyond Frankenstein. Along each relationship line, try to describe what sort of relationship it is. We have included a couple of examples to set you off.



What is it, do you think, that causes problems in all of the relationships? Is there a common factor?

## A PERIOD FILM (i.e. a film set in the past)

At the start of the film we are told that the story begins in 1794 and that much of the action takes place before this. Thus, we are expecting certain historical details to appear in the film, particularly in the way of costume and sets. It is up to the design department of the production company to create a feeling of the period.

Below are comments made by the members of the design team:

*'Branagh wanted to achieve a sort of heightened realism. The whole film is a gutsy, dramatic piece which called for a full blooded colour scheme.'*

*"Kenneth Branagh was not interested in historical accuracy for the sake of purist recreation. He wanted to do something more with colours, silhouette and texture - costumes that suggested the period rather than slavishly copying it."*

## AN ADAPTATION

When a filmmaker takes a novel and adapts it for the screen there are bound to be a number of changes that need to be made. Certain things cannot be done on screen which can be done in a novel and vice versa. However, many critics have said that the story of Frankenstein was one that was written to be filmed, even though it first appeared nearly eighty years before the birth of cinema.

Which aspects of the novel do you think would work better on film than on the printed page? Why?

It is worth looking at two key changes which Branagh has made to the novel and considering why he made them.

- 1 In the film, when the creature comes to Frankenstein and asks him to create a partner for him, he chooses the body of Justine to bring back to life.
- 2 In the novel Frankenstein destroys the half-made female creature before ever bringing it to life. What happens in the film?

Why do you think Branagh makes these two significant changes? How does this affect the way in which we understand both Frankenstein and the creature? What does this add to the story?

## A FRANKENSTEIN STORY

How does MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN use our expectations of the FRANKENSTEIN story and in what ways does it surprise us? Look back at the work you did at the very start of this guide. Compare the image that you found of the creature from the 1931 version with that of the 1994 version which you will find later in the guide. How are they different? In what ways is the creature, as played by Robert de Niro, a creature for the 1<sup>990</sup>'s compared to Boris Karloffs portrayal?

## A SCIENCE FICTION STORY

Some critics have said that the Frankenstein story contains certain elements of the science-fiction genre. Look back at your expectations about this particular genre. What aspects of MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN fit in with the conventions of the genre? What does the film have to say about science and scientists?

## MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN - THE DIRECTOR'S INTENTION

We have looked at the film in terms of the different genres that may or may not be contained within it. It is now important to look at the way that Kenneth Branagh saw his film. Below are some of his comments about it:

*“I wanted to show an elemental passion that is as powerful as Victor’s obsession with his work, an extraordinary love that would match the tragic intensity of the story.”*

*‘For me, the story is less a horror film than a larger than life Gothic fairy tale. It’s full of real psychological insights about family. It deals with the themes of parenting and responsibility, of birth and death, of man’s arrogance in the face of nature and his inhumanity to man.*

*‘The image that I keep seeing is a child in a delivery room, delivered and then abandoned, squealing and screeching. Frankenstein abandons his child and thereafter suffers the appalling consequences of his actions.’*

Looking back at the work you completed on genre, how does Branagh’s description of the film compare to the generic expectations that you might have had?

### **Task**

*Look at all of Branagh’s comments and highlight what you think are the key words that Branagh uses to describe the*

*film, its plot and its themes. Then for each of the words that you have chosen, try to suggest two or three moments from the film which you think would illustrate and support Branagh’s vision of the film.*

## THE CREATURE

*“Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay*

*To mould me man? Did I solicit thee*

*From darkness to promote me?”*

Milton - Paradise Lost

These lines appeared on the frontispiece of the 1818 edition of Mary Shelley's novel FRANKENSTEIN. Adam, in Paradise, is talking to God. In many ways he is complaining about his situation - created by God yet given free will to make decisions, the consequences of which he does not know.

Compare these lines with those spoken by the creature to Frankenstein in the novel:

*'Unfeeling, heartless creator! You endowed me with perceptions and passions and then cast me abroad an object for scorn and horror of mankind.. I am alone, and miserable; man will not associate with me; but one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me.*

The creature created by Frankenstein is often described as a monster. But is he a monster or a victim? Consider that he is not even given a name?

## FRIEND, FAMILY, FATHER

These are the three words that the creature speaks as he hides in the pigsty. Why should these three words be so important to the creature?

Consider the various friendships, families and father figures that you encounter in the film. Describe each one (you may have covered some of this in an earlier piece of work).

Then consider the ways in which the creature either does or does not fit into these families, friendships and parental relationships. What effect does he have on each? Could you say that at any one moment in his life we see him happy? Does he ever gain any of these three things - friend, family, father?

## CREATURE, MONSTER, VICTIM

Having thought about these three key words, are you now in a position to decide which of the three descriptions of the creature - creature, monster, victim - is the most correct? You could divide into three groups and each group could attempt to argue one view. You should try to back up your arguments with references to the film.

# CHARACTERS

You have looked in detail at the character of the creature. Now you should consider the other characters in the film.

In the chart below, next to each character try to give a brief description of their character type and also how they are shown within the film. For each character you should try to give examples from the film to back up your argument.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

SCENES IN FILM

Frankenstein

Elizabeth

Henry

Father

Dr Waldman