

1

A 'strange and harrowing story'

How does Mary Shelley introduce the story?

Your progress in this unit:

- explore what you already know about *Frankenstein*
- explain how Shelley sets up the story at the beginning of the novel
- identify your own key extract from the beginning of the novel
- create a short documentary about Shelley's early life.

GETTING STARTED - THE STORY AND YOU

What's it all about?

Frankenstein is one of the best-known tales in English literature. Even if you have never read it, you are probably familiar with the story.

- 1 Write a brief summary of about 150 words, outlining what you know of the story.
- 2 When you have finished, compare your summaries of *Frankenstein* to others in your class. Make a list of the similarities.
 - a What are the names of the central **characters** in the story?
 - b What happens to these characters?
 - c What elements of horror and ghost stories are there?

Read the summary, then read Letters 1-4 and Chapters 1 and 2.



Watch scenes from the beginning of the novel on Cambridge Elevate.



Contexts

Mary Shelley's life

- Born in 1797, Shelley's mother died just a few days after her birth.
- Percy Shelley, a radical poet, fell in love with Mary when she was only 16. He was already married with one child and another on the way.
- Mary's father banned her from seeing Percy Shelley, so they ran away together to Europe, setting off in a small fishing boat across the Channel.
- They travelled through Europe, where Shelley gathered many ideas that she later used in *Frankenstein*.
- At the age of 17 she gave birth to a baby girl, who died soon after.
- The poet Lord Byron invited the Shelleys to stay at his villa in Switzerland, where, one evening, he issued a challenge that they should all write ghost stories.
- Some nights later, Mary had a nightmare that gave her the idea for *Frankenstein*.
- Shelley first had the idea for *Frankenstein* in 1816 and it was published in 1818.
- She later re-wrote it, and the final version was published in 1831.



Key terms

characters: the people in a story; even when based on real people, characters in a novel are invented or fictionalised.

LETTERS 1-4 AND CHAPTERS 1 AND 2

The story begins with the words of Captain Robert Walton, an ambitious young Arctic explorer, who relates his adventures in letters to his sister, Margaret. Walton's first letter is written from St Petersburg in Russia, where he plans a voyage to the undiscovered North Pole. We realise he is a man with a passion for discovery and adventure.

Walton writes to his sister from Archangel, where he has hired a ship. He feels lonely but tries to remain positive, believing that his project **'hurries me out of the common pathways of men'**.

Walton reports that the ship is making good progress: **'What can stop the determined heart and resolved will of man?'**

The stranger's health is revived and Walton grows to love him as a brother. They recognise kindred spirits in each other, and the stranger starts to tell Walton his **'strange and harrowing'** tale.

Their ship trapped in ice, Walton and his crew see a gigantic figure on a sledge disappear in the distance. In the morning, Walton hears the crew talking to a European man in a wretched condition. He tells them he is in this lonely place to **'seek one who fled from me'**. When they tell him about the figure on the sledge, he becomes concerned.

Victor Frankenstein tells the story of his childhood and how his mother adopted a poor young girl, Elizabeth. Frankenstein explains how he grew to love her very much.

Frankenstein relates that he was a clever and inquisitive child, fascinated by the secrets of medieval science or alchemy, which he learnt from a book by Cornelius Agrippa. Above all, he wanted to restore to life things that had died. One night he saw an oak tree destroyed by lightning and was awed by the power of nature. His childhood over, he started on a path towards his **'utter and terrible destruction'**.



GCSE English Literature for AQA: *Frankenstein*

GETTING CLOSER - FOCUS ON DETAILS

Walton and Frankenstein - two characters driven by obsession

In his second letter to his sister, Walton laments that he has no friend on his journey who shares his interests and to whom he can talk about his plans. As Victor Frankenstein begins his story, we learn that he too felt lonely in his youth. This is an example of a technique called ‘doubling’ or ‘mirroring’, where a writer shows similarities in the personalities and stories of different characters.

- 1 Copy and complete the following table to find similarities between Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein.

Similarity	Captain Walton	Quotation	Victor Frankenstein	Quotation
they both have close relationships with their sister	writes to his sister	‘I love you very tenderly. Remember me with affection, should you never hear from me again.’	loves and admires his adopted sister Elizabeth from an early age	
the both have obsessions	obsessed with finding a passage through the Arctic		obsessed with alchemy	
they find themselves on the polar ice				
they are fascinated by discovery and knowledge				

PUTTING DETAILS TO USE

Establishing the setting

Walton’s letters to Margaret are written from the far north, and Frankenstein tells his story to Walton against the background of an icy Arctic landscape. This is not the most obvious **setting** for a ghost story.

- 1 Look at the following reasons why Shelley might have chosen to open the novel in this setting. Rank the statements, with the one you think is most important at 1 and the one you think is least important at 4.
- a The emptiness of the vast wasteland mirrors Walton’s loneliness and Frankenstein’s isolation.
 - b The constant references to snow and ice make the reader feel vulnerable at the start of the story.
 - c This is a landscape for adventure and exploration. The reader therefore understands right from the start that this will be a story about exploration and discovery.
 - d The Arctic lay on the boundaries of the known world and this echoes Frankenstein’s experiments on the edge of known science at the time.



Watch a character interview with Walton on Cambridge Elevate.



Find out more about context and setting in *Frankenstein* in Unit 12.

1 A 'strange and harrowing story'

- 2 Look at the following quotation. What do you think it reveals about Frankenstein's feelings for Elizabeth? Identify five words or phrases to support your view.

Her brow was clear and ample, her blue eyes cloudless, and her lips and the moulding of her face so expressive of sensibility and sweetness that none could behold her without looking on her as of a distinct species, a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features.

Chapter 1

Walton's letters

Shelley uses an **epistolary** technique in this novel. This means that she uses documents – often letters – to tell the story.

- 1 In pairs, discuss why you think Shelley chose to tell the story in this way.

Shelley also uses a technique called **foreshadowing** – hinting at things that might happen later:

No word, no expression could body forth the kind of relation in which she stood to me – my more than sister, since till death she was to be mine only.

Chapter 1

- 2 Find words in this extract that suggest what might happen later in the story.

Language

- 1 Captain Walton uses the kind of language that sailors use. Find five examples of this type of language in his letters.
- 2 In contrast, Frankenstein uses the language of philosophy and science. Write down words or phrases from this extract that are typical of the scientific language Frankenstein uses.

Sir Isaac Newton is said to have avowed that he felt like a child picking up shells beside the great unexplored ocean of truth. Those of his successors in each branch of natural philosophy [...] appeared even to my boy's apprehensions, as tyros [beginners] engaged in the same pursuit.

Chapter 2



Find out more about language in *Frankenstein* in Unit 15.



Key terms

- setting:** the description of the place in which a novel is set.
- epistolary:** describing a technique in which writers use documents such as letters to tell a story.
- foreshadowing:** a technique in which a writer hints at something that will happen later in a story.

No word, no expression could body forth the kind of relation in which she stood to me.

Chapter 1



GCSE English Literature for AQA: *Frankenstein*

Frankenstein’s fascination

- 1 Frankenstein finds a book by Cornelius Agrippa and is fascinated by the ideas of this medieval alchemist. What phrase does he use to describe Agrippa’s theories?
- 2 What event occurs at the end of Chapter 2 to change Frankenstein’s ideas and the focus of his fascination?



Learning checkpoint

Look back over your work so far in this unit and write:

- a paragraph about Frankenstein’s character
- a paragraph about the setting at the start of the novel.

Use supporting detail and quotations from the text in your paragraphs.

GETTING IT INTO WRITING

The format of the exam questions

In your exam you will answer a question about *Frankenstein*. You will be provided with a short extract from the novel and asked to write about that extract and about the novel as a whole. The format of the question will be similar to this:

In an extract from (Chapter X), Shelley describes (person, situation, event, place, relationship, emotions, etc.) Write about:

- how she presents the (person, situation, event, place, relationship, emotions, etc.) in the extract
- how she presents the (person, situation, event, place, relationship, emotions, etc.) in the novel as a whole.

The text lasso

Throughout this book you will practise answering questions like this. To do so, you will need to choose extracts that are about 300 words long to write about. To find an extract of this length, follow these steps:

- Open your copy of the novel to any page and count a 300-word section.
- Lay a piece of paper over your page and mark out the space of the 300-word section.
- Take the paper off the page and cut around your markings. You now have a hole in the paper that is about the size of 300 words of text.
- Lay this piece of paper over any page in your copy of the novel to select a 300-word extract of your choice.

Writing about setting in the novel

Look through Walton’s letters and Chapters 1 and 2. Choose an incident in which setting plays an important part. Find a quotation at the centre of your chosen incident that seems worth noting. Now lay your text lasso over the page so that the key quotation is roughly in the middle. Move it about a little so that the extract coincides with the beginnings and endings of sentences.

Now complete the following activities using the extract you have chosen.

- 1 Summarise your extract in one sentence.
- 2 Explain in a single sentence why your chosen extract is a key event in the chapter.
- 3 Choose 8–10 words from your extract that look interesting. Write a bullet point for each one, explaining why you think each word is important in describing the setting.




Complete this assignment on Cambridge Elevate.

GETTING FURTHER

Create a two-minute documentary


You are going to create a short **documentary** about Shelley's early life and the events that led her to write *Frankenstein*. First look at the information about Shelley's life at the start of this unit.

- 1
- Use the facts to write a voiceover for a two-minute documentary. You will need to decide which pieces of information to choose and what order to present them in. You will also need to rewrite the notes to make them more interesting for your audience.
- 2
- When you are happy with the draft of your voiceover, use a copy of the following template to create a **storyboard** for your documentary. Find appropriate still images, music or quotations to illustrate what is being said. Some examples have been given, but you can use your own ideas.

Key terms

documentary: a film that uses pictures or interviews with people involved in real events to provide a report on a subject; documentaries can contain opinion, but they should be based on facts and evidence.

storyboard: a sequence of drawings that show the different scenes in a story or levels in a video game.

Visual	Voiceover	Music and sound effects
		Beethoven - Opus 104.
	Mary Shelley lived a quite remarkable life, which often seems more dramatic than her most famous novel itself.	
	The young Shelley grew up in a time of unprecedented scientific discovery. Biologists were conducting experiments with electricity to try and bring the dead back to life.	Sound of electric shock.
	Mary's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, is often described as the founder of feminism. Sadly, the young Mary never knew her mother, who died just days after her birth.	

- 3
- When you have finished your storyboard, compare it with others in the class. If you have access to editing facilities, film and edit your two-minute documentary.