

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Introduction

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* raised a number of controversial issues when it was first published in 1818, and has continued to do so ever since. Indeed, some of those issues are even more pressing in the 21st than they were in the early nineteenth century with the exponential growth of technology and science. The Penguin Classics edition of the novel claims: "as a cautionary tale warning of the dangers that can be cast into society by a presuming experimental science, *Frankenstein* is without equal." With this theme alone, the text provides a rich vein of conceptual analysis for a community of enquiry.

Using the materials

The materials in this collection – principally presented as a series of suggested stimuli for the purpose of enquiry - have been sequenced roughly in the order that a study of the novel or a film would imply. However, some overlapping of ideas is likely if all six suggestions are used to accompany textual study – teachers will need to make judgements about which stimuli and in which order will work together best for their needs. Furthermore, whilst extracts from the novel and/or film versions of *Frankenstein* are used as stimuli, individual stimuli could be used as stand-alone enquiries with some contextualisation. In addition, the materials could support a teacher in drawing out philosophical issues arising spontaneously from the class, either during or following the study of the text. Additional concept-based suggestions, exercises and resources to support enquiry are also provided.

Outline of materials

Stimulus 1: An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump: responsible scientific experimentation.

Stimulus 2: Playing God: imagining the creation of a perfect person.

Stimulus 3: Beauty and the Beast: exploring reactions to monstrous appearance.

Stimulus 4: Who am I? Looking at personal identity and purpose.

Stimulus 5: Justice and Revenge: distinguishing the two.

Stimulus 6: Monstrous companions: should Frankenstein have created a female monster?

A concept collection: to suggest a wide range of concept arising from the text to stimulate further thinking, enquiry or research.

Further concept activities: activities to assist exploration of central concepts in the text.

Resources to support enquiry

Stimulus 1: *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump.*

Getting started: working in twos or threes, students discuss these questions: a) what is man's greatest invention and for what reasons? b) what is man's worst invention and for what reasons? Twos and threes join up to form larger groups, to select their best idea for a) and b) to share with the class.

Presentation of the stimulus: some of the central issues of *Frankenstein* are raised by the cover of the Penguin Classic edition. Study of the painting will also provide some helpful historical, cultural and social contexts for any study of *Frankenstein*.



This painting (1768), by Joseph Wright of Derby, is entitled *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*. Whilst the painting speaks for itself in many ways, it **might** be useful to give students some context. The National Gallery provides the following commentary:

A travelling scientist is shown demonstrating the formation of a vacuum by withdrawing air from a flask containing a white cockatoo, though common birds like sparrows would normally have been used. Air pumps were developed in the 17th century and were relatively familiar by Wright's day. The artist's subject is not scientific invention, but a human drama in a night-time setting.

The bird will die if the demonstrator continues to deprive it of oxygen, and Wright leaves us in doubt as to whether or not the cockatoo will be reprieved. The painting reveals a wide range of individual reactions, from the frightened children, through the reflective philosopher, the excited interest of the youth on the left, to the indifferent young lovers concerned only with each other.

The figures are dramatically lit by a single candle, while in the window the moon appears. On the table in front of the candle is a glass containing a skull.

Alternatively, the painting could be presented with the following sequence of questions which lead into a question-forming exercise:

1. What do we know given the details of this picture?
2. What can we work out?
3. What questions do we want answers to?
4. What wider questions does this picture make you want to ask?

An interesting analysis of the painting can be found on the gallery website which could also be used to further contextualise the painting: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/joseph-wright-of-derby-an-experiment-on-a-bird-in-the-air-pump>

As a visual stimulus (with the additional thoughts of the commentary), this opens up conflicting responses to scientific experimentation and invention. For example, is it cruel to experiment on animals? Is it right to inflict pain on other living things for the purpose of human progress? Does the survival of humanity depend upon scientific progress? What counts as progress in science? Should there be limits to what is done in the name of science? How should those limits be set and upon what criteria? Who sets the limits of scientific experimentation and invention?

Stimulus 2: Playing God.

Getting started:

Students are asked to imagine that they have the power and ability to create the perfect human. What characteristics would they include in their design? What characteristics would they want to screen out? All aspect of a human can be considered: diagrams or drawings can be made.

Discuss the ideas that emerge. What questions does this activity raise?

Presentation of the stimulus:

Chapter 4 of *Frankenstein* – see resources for extract. In this chapter, Frankenstein experiments with creating life. He is confident that his experiments will end in the creation of a living creature. He revels in his own God-like achievement.

What questions does this chapter stimulate? Link these questions to the ones raised by the starter activity. Refine the questions before full enquiry.

Stimulus 3: Beauty and Beast

Getting started: a film version of the birth of the monster could be shown to support understanding of the reading. An initial stimulus to thought could be the question: how ought Frankenstein to react to the birth of his creation?

Presentation of the stimulus:

Chapter 5 of *Frankenstein* – see resources for extract

- Some possible questions include: once the creature has life, what responsibilities does Frankenstein have? What responsibilities does the creator have when his inventions have bad consequences? Once the creature is alive, what is the right thing for Frankenstein to do? If I create something, does that give me the right to destroy it? Is Frankenstein to blame for what his creature becomes and the actions he performs? Does the creature deserve punishment? Is the creature doomed by his monstrous form? These questions could lead to enquiry into issues of parental responsibility or attitudes to deformity or abnormality at birth or broader attitudes to appearance or to outsiders.

Stimulus 4: Who am I?

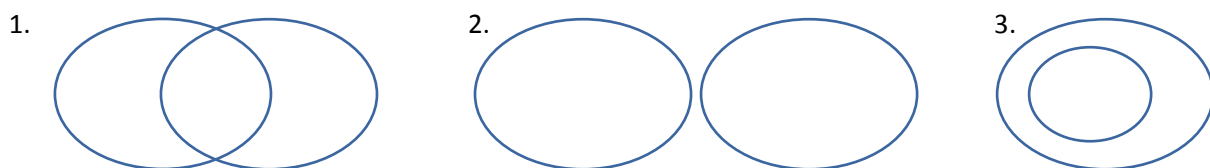
Getting started: begin with the question “if any form of human organ could be transplanted, would any part change you so much that you would be someone else”? Give this some thought before showing the film extract which follows.

Presentation of the stimulus: watch the Kenneth Branagh film of *Frankenstein* (1994) at the point when Frankenstein meets with his creation in the Alps. The creature questions his creator on the purpose of his creation and its identity (1 hour and 45 minutes into the film – Frankenstein reacts to his creature with the words “You speak ...” obtainable on YouTube). End at 1 hour 47 minutes and thirty seconds before the creature starts his request for a companion. What questions does this clip suggest for enquiry?

Questions of personal identity and the purpose of an individual life are among the possibilities. Indeed, is the creature human? What does that mean and how do we know? He was made from dead materials, brought to life by Frankenstein. Does the creature have a soul? Is he one person? What makes a person, a person? Can we have someone else’s memories? Does a name matter?

Stimulus 5: Justice and Revenge

Getting started: draw three diagrams as below. Ask students to decide which of the three diagrams best represents the relationship between the concepts of revenge and justice. Are they totally separate or are do they have overlapping meanings?



Presentation of the stimulus: the stimulus is the knowledge of what the creature does to Frankenstein in revenge for suffering e.g. the murder of William, the death of Justine, the murder of Elizabeth.

Stimulus 6: Monstrous Companions

Getting started: ask students to write a yes or no answer with one good reason or one good example on post-it notes to the question: “Is it ever right to prevent a woman from having children?” Place all post-it notes on the wall for later use.

Presentation of the stimulus: Chapter 9, volume 2 and Chapter 3, volume 3 of the novel are the context for this topic (see resources). The reasons given by the monster for his desire for a companion are relevant to the enquiry. The creature maintains, “my vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor; and my virtues will necessarily arise I live in communion with an equal.” Frankenstein fails to create the companion on the grounds that “a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth.”

In this case the question for enquiry is given: should Frankenstein have created the female creature as requested? Draw on student comments from the post-it note exercise where relevant.

A concept collection to support enquiry based on *Frankenstein*



Link the concepts above to Frankenstein and then to the creature. Draw a Venn diagram to decide what they have in common and what distinguishes them. Use as the basis of further discussion.

Rank the above concepts under the headings vices and virtues. Explore why some concepts are difficult to place under such headings, and the issues that emerge. What other concepts emerge?

Some further concept activities

1. Use a concept line to rank all the actions in the story of Frankenstein as MOST EVIL to LEAST EVIL. For example, when Frankenstein allows Justine to be hanged for the murder of William, is that more or less evil than the creature's murder of William? Or is Frankenstein's desertion of his creation more or less evil than the creature's desire for revenge? (see resource sheet)
2. Using the study of the narrative as a basis for ideas, select human characteristics that lead to pain and anguish e.g. ambition, pride, deception, dishonesty, irresponsibility, lack of compassion, trusting to appearances, greed, the desire for revenge etc. Select the FIVE characteristics the class agree to be most dominant in the text. Students then choose ONE only that they can eliminate from the world forever on the grounds that it would have the most impact on human happiness. What would it be and why?

Playing God

Resource sheet for Stimulus 2

When I found so astonishing a power placed within my hands, I hesitated a long time concerning the manner in which I should employ it. Although I possessed the capacity of bestowing animation, yet to prepare a frame for the reception of it, with all its intricacies of fibres, muscles, and veins, still remained a work of inconceivable difficulty and labour. I doubted at first whether I should attempt the creation of a being like myself, or one of simpler organisation; but my imagination was too much exalted by my first success to permit me to doubt of my ability to give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man. The materials at present within my command hardly appeared adequate to so arduous an undertaking; but I doubted not that I should ultimately succeed. I prepared myself for a multitude of reverses; my operations might be incessantly baffled, and at last my work be imperfect: yet, when I considered the improvement which every day takes place in science and mechanics, I was encouraged to hope my present attempts would at least lay the foundations of future success. Nor could I consider the magnitude and complexity of my plan as any argument of its impracticability. It was with these feelings that I began the creation of a human being. As the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed, I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make the being of a gigantic stature; that is to say, about eight feet in height, and proportionally large. After having formed this determination, and having spent some months in successfully collecting and arranging my materials, I began.

No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success. Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. Pursuing these reflections, I thought, that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption.

These thoughts supported my spirits, while I pursued my undertaking with unremitting ardour. My cheek had grown pale with study, and my person had become emaciated with confinement. Sometimes, on the very brink of certainty, I failed; yet still I clung to the hope which the next day or the next hour might realise. One secret which I alone possessed was the hope to which I had dedicated myself; and the moon gazed on my midnight labours, while, with unrelaxed and breathless eagerness, I pursued nature to her hiding-places. Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil, as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave, or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay? My limbs now tremble and my eyes swim with the remembrance; but then a resistless, and almost frantic, impulse urged me forward; I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit. It was indeed but a passing trance that only made me feel with renewed acuteness so soon as, the unnatural stimulus ceasing to operate, I had returned to my old habits. I collected bones from charnel houses; and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame. In a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments by a gallery and staircase, I kept my workshop of filthy creation: my eye-balls were starting from their sockets in attending to the details of my employment. The dissecting room and the slaughterhouse furnished many of my materials; and often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation, whilst, still urged on by an eagerness which perpetually increased, I brought my work near to a conclusion.

Beauty and the beast

Resource sheet for Stimulus 3

It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! -- Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.

The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time traversing my bedchamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep. At length lassitude succeeded to the tumult I had before endured; and I threw myself on the bed in my clothes, endeavouring to seek a few moments of forgetfulness. But it was in vain: I slept, indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams. I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed: when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch -- the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, and rushed down stairs. I took refuge in the courtyard belonging to the house which I inhabited; where I remained during the rest of the night, walking up and down in the greatest agitation, listening attentively, catching and fearing each sound as if it were to announce the approach of the demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life.

Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived.

I passed the night wretchedly. Sometimes my pulse beat so quickly and hardly that I felt the palpitation of every artery; at others, I nearly sank to the ground through languor and extreme weakness. Mingled with this horror, I felt the bitterness of disappointment; dreams that had been my food and pleasant rest for so long a space were now become a hell to me; and the change was so rapid, the overthrow so complete!

Morning, dismal and wet, at length dawned, and discovered to my sleepless and aching eyes the church of Ingolstadt, its white steeple and clock, which indicated the sixth hour. The porter opened the gates of the court, which had that night been my asylum, and I issued into the streets, pacing them with quick steps, as if I sought to avoid the wretch whom I feared every turning of the street would present to my view. I did not dare return to the apartment which I inhabited, but felt impelled to hurry on, although drenched by the rain which poured from a black and comfortless sky.

Monstrous companions

Resource sheet for Stimulus 6

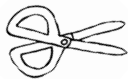
I sat one evening in my laboratory; the sun had set, and the moon was just rising from the sea; I had not sufficient light for my employment, and I remained idle, in a pause of consideration of whether I should leave my labour for the night or hasten its conclusion by an unremitting attention to it. As I sat, a train of reflection occurred to me which led me to consider the effects of what I was now doing. Three years before, I was engaged in the same manner and had created a fiend whose unparalleled barbarity had desolated my heart and filled it forever with the bitterest remorse. I was now about to form another being of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighbourhood of man and hide himself in deserts, but she had not; and she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation. They might even hate each other; the creature who already lived loathed his own deformity, and might he not conceive a greater abhorrence for it when it came before his eyes in the female form? She also might turn with disgust from him to the superior beauty of man; she might quit him, and he be again alone, exasperated by the fresh provocation of being deserted by one of his own species.

Even if they were to leave Europe and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. Had I right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations? I had before been moved by the sophisms of the being I had created; I had been struck senseless by his fiendish threats; but now, for the first time, the wickedness of my promise burst upon me; I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace at the price, perhaps, of the existence of the whole human race.

I trembled, and my heart failed within me; when, on looking up, I saw, by the light of the moon, the daemon at the casement. A ghastly grin wrinkled his lips as he gazed on me, where I sat fulfilling the task which he had allotted to me. Yes, he had followed me in my travels; he had loitered in forests, hid himself in caves, or taken refuge in wide and desert heaths; and he now came to mark my progress, and claim the fulfilment of my promise.

As I looked on him, his countenance expressed the utmost extent of malice and treachery. I thought with a sensation of madness on my promise of creating another like to him, and trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged. The wretch saw me destroy the creature on whose future existence he depended for happiness, and, with a howl of devilish despair and revenge, withdrew.

I left the room, and, locking the door, made a solemn vow in my own heart never to resume my labours; and then, with trembling steps, I sought my own apartment. I was alone; none were near me to dissipate the gloom, and relieve me from the sickening oppression of the most terrible reveries.



| MOST EVIL | LEAST EVIL |
|---|------------|
| | |
| Frankenstein creates his creature | |
| Frankenstein conceals his work from others | |
| Frankenstein deserts his creature | |
| People are afraid of the creature's appearance | |
| People hurt the creature because he frightens them | |
| The creature seeks revenge on the creator who condemned him to be feared and hated | |
| The creature murders William | |
| The creature causes Justine to be convicted of the murder of William | |
| Frankenstein allows Justine to be hanged for a murder he strongly suspects she did not commit | |
| Frankenstein agrees to make the female creature | |
| Frankenstein breaks his promise to build the female creature | |
| The creature kills Elizabeth | |