Putting Frankenstein in Context (up to 60 mins)

This learning resource is designed to help students understand the social, cultural and historical context in which *Frankenstein* was written. It asks students to consider how the events of Mary Shelley's own life may have influenced the content, themes and stylistic choices of the novel.

Who is it for?

The resource is designed for students of KS3 English and KS4 English Literature, who have either read *Frankenstein* or watched the National Theatre production of *Frankenstein* adapted from the novel by Nick Dear and directed by Danny Boyle.

These activities will enable students to set aspects of the text in context, and consider different interpretations. While these activities are particularly aimed at KS3 and KS4, the videos will also provide useful background at KS5. Drama and Theatre students might also use these resources, in tandem with others, to consider how drama has been created.

Learning outcomes

Learners will:

- Explore the social, cultural and political context in which *Frankenstein* was written.
- Explain how Mary Shelley's personal life may have influenced her writing of the novel.
- Take part in group discussions and be encouraged to form their own opinions.

You will need

- Access to the film Mary Shelley: A biography available in the On Demand player.
- Access to the clip 'William asks Victor about creating life' available in the On Demand player.

Activities

1.

Show the film *Mary Shelley: A biography* in the 'On Demand' player. The film features a writer and a historian telling the story of Mary Shelley's life, and how she came to write *Frankenstein*. It also explains some of the contextual events happening in the world at that time. Ask the class to take notes while they watch the film, writing down key points from Mary Shelley's life. To help less able groups, you could divide the class into three, and ask one group to note down key points about the places in Mary Shelley's story, one about the *people* in her story, and one about *the things she did* or *the events that happened to her.* You may choose to show the film a second time.

2.

Hand out the *Frankenstein* **synopsis**. This is to help students who are less able to recall the events of the novel – you can skip this step with more able groups.

3.

Draw connections between *Frankenstein* and Mary Shelley's life. Divide the class into small groups. Ask each group to think of ways in which the story, characters and themes of *Frankenstein* might have been inspired by the events in Mary Shelley's life, which they saw in the film. If they get stuck, they can look at the list of topics mentioned by the film on the synopsis hand-out.

4.

Ask each group to share the connections they've found, encouraging the class to build on each suggestion with further thoughts of their own. It may be helpful to work through the list above to prompt broader discussion, or through the lists given on the synopsis hand-out. As the discussion progresses, ask the class to brainstorm a list of themes they think would have been most important to Mary Shelley – things like parenthood, nature, religion, abandonment, and so on. Write these on the board as they are suggested.

5.

Show the clip 'William asks Victor about creating life' in the 'On Demand' player. This is a clip from the 2011 National Theatre production of *Frankenstein*, adapted from the novel by Nick Dear and directed by Danny Boyle. It shows William, Frankenstein's younger brother, appearing to him as a ghost, asking about what will happen after he brings the Creature's bride to life.

6.

Debate the relevance of the novel's themes, to readers of the time, and readers today. Start by splitting the class in two, with half speaking for the 19th Century reader and half for readers of today. In the light of the clip they've just watched, and the themes you've listed on the board, ask the class to think about these three questions which are raised by the novel:

- Is a parent responsible for the actions of their children?
- Are there some things science shouldn't interfere with?
- Is God the source of all life on earth?

Ask the groups to come up with reasons why each question is relevant to the readers they represent. Then debate which group these questions are more relevant to. You can continue this activity with further questions created from other themes of the novel.

Putting Frankenstein in Context

Frankenstein: Plot synopsis

Robert Walton, the captain of a ship headed to the North Pole, is writing letters back to his sister in England. When the ship is trapped in ice, Walton discovers Victor Frankenstein, travelling by dogdrawn sled and very weak from the cold. As Walton tries to nurse him back to health, Frankenstein tells him the story of how he came to be there.

Victor spent a happy childhood in Geneva with his cousin Elizabeth and his friend Henry. When he was older, Victor went to university in Ingolstadt to study chemistry and natural philosophy. There, he became obsessed with discovering the secret to life itself.

Over several months in his apartment, Victor secretly works to make a creature out of dead bodies. One night, he succeeds in bringing it to life. But when he looks at his Creature, he finds it hideous, and flees. Returning later with his friend Henry, he finds the Creature is gone.

Victor returns home to Geneva, sick at the thought of what he's done. But he learns his younger brother, William, has been murdered. In the woods where the boy was strangled, Victor sees the Creature, and becomes convinced that it is guilty of William's death.

Travelling to the mountains to ease his grief, Victor is confronted by the Creature, who admits to murdering William but begs forgiveness. The Creature tells his version of the story from the night Victor abandoned him - how he was cruelly treated, and outcast by society because of the way he looked. Hiding in the woodshed of a family in the country, the Creature learned to read and speak. From Victor's journal, he discovered the story of his creation, and killed William to enact revenge on Victor for abandoning him.

The Creature promises to leave Victor alone if he will make a new female Creature to be his mate. Victor reluctantly agrees, and heads to a remote island to start work. Though he makes some progress on the female creature, he is overcome by doubt and fear, eventually destroying her as the Creature watches. Enraged, the Creature vows revenge.

The next day, Victor is arrested for the murder of Henry - who he realises the Creature has killed. Eventually he is let go, and returns to Geneva to marry Elizabeth. Wary that the Creature will come for him too, he sends Elizabeth away to wait for him - but realises too late that it is she the Creature will kill next. Victor confesses everything to his father, who dies of grief. Having lost everything, Victor determines to hunt down the Creature and destroy him.

Victor pursues the Creature towards the North Pole, where he is overcome by the cold and found by Captain Walton. Eventually, Victor dies from sickness, and Walton finds the Creature weeping over his body. He tells Walton of his loneliness, suffering, hatred and remorse. With nothing left, he disappears onto the ice, ready to die.

Frankenstein: Key topics in Mary Shelley's life

As described in the film 'Mary Shelley: A biography', these are some of the key people and events in Mary Shelley's life which had an influence on her writing of Frankenstein.

- Mary Shelley's parents
- Why she left England
- What society thought of her
 - The men she stayed with in Geneva
 - The weather in Geneva
- The deaths of people she knew
- The Industrial Revolution
- The recent war in Europe