Standards Focus: Author Biography
Mary Shelley

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley was born in London, England on August 30, 1797, into a well-known literary family. Shelley’s mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, died shortly after giving birth to her. Mary Wollstonecraft had already received recognition as the early feminist writer of A Vindication of the Rights of Women. This left young Mary Godwin to be raised by her father, William Godwin, the author of Enquiry Concerning Political Justice. Because of his beliefs, Godwin and his family were often surrounded by progressive radicals, writers, and poets such as Thomas Paine, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Shelley, who had been expelled from Oxford for refusing to admit that he penned The Necessity of Atheism.

As a teenager, Mary Shelley read voraciously and soaked in the conversations of the intellectuals that her father entertained. One of these men, poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, took an interest in the teenaged Mary. In 1814, at the age of sixteen, Mary Godwin ran away with twenty-two-year-old Percy Bysshe Shelley, who happened to be married at the time. This action strained Mary’s relationship with her father, and the two did not speak for several years. While Mary and Percy toured Europe during their tempestuous and impulsive relationship, Percy continued sporadically seeing his wife, Harriet. Percy’s marriage ended in November 1816 when Harriet, pregnant with her husband’s child, drowned herself in London. The next month, on December 30, 1816, Mary Godwin and Percy Shelley married.

Throughout their relationship, Percy and his literary friends influenced Mary and her writing. While visiting the British writer Lord Byron in Switzerland in the summer of 1816, Mary, Percy, and Lord Byron decided to pass the time by engaging in a contest to determine who could write the best ghost story. Eighteen-year-old Mary’s story of a scientist who constructs a repulsive monster evolved into the novel Frankenstein and won Mary the prize over the two older and more seasoned authors. After Mary completed the novel, Percy Shelley edited Frankenstein and wrote its preface in Mary’s voice. When the book was published anonymously in three volumes in 1818, it became an instant bestseller. Later, in 1823, Frankenstein was reprinted in two volumes bearing Mary Shelley’s name as the author.

From 1815-1819, Mary and Percy Shelley had four children, only one of whom survived childhood. In 1822, Mary became a single parent to young William Shelley when Percy Shelley drowned in a boating accident off the coast of Italy. Mary continued to write, publishing Valperga in 1823, The Last Man in 1826, The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck in 1830, and Falkner in 1837. She also edited the works of her husband after his death. After residing with her son and his wife for several years, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley died in London in 1851. She was buried alongside her parents in the churchyard of St. Peters in Bournemouth, England.
Comprehension Check: Exploring Expository Writing—Author Biography

Directions: Using the article about Mary Shelley, complete the following worksheet. Be sure to answer each question using complete sentences.

1. Explain how Mary’s upbringing influenced young Mary and her life.
2. Evaluate Mary and Percy’s initial relationship in terms of nineteenth century morality. How do you think Mary and Percy would have been received by traditional society? How do Mary and Percy’s radical backgrounds set the stage for their relationship to occur?
3. Tell how Percy Shelley impacted and influenced Mary Shelley’s writing.
4. Infer why Frankenstein was originally published anonymously.
5. List three books that Mary Shelley wrote and the year in which they were published.
Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818) draws heavily on the British Romantic and Gothic traditions, while her use of science and technology positions the young author’s creation as one of the first science fiction novels.

Literary Romanticism began in earnest with William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Lyrical Ballads (1798) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s Faust (1808). Springing from the ideals of the French and American Revolutions, Romanticism embraced the progressive movement that paralleled the scientific and Industrial Revolutions. Romantic writers frequently wrote about nature, travel, folklore, and legends—aspects which Shelley incorporates into Frankenstein. On a personal level, the Romantics traditionally stood against authoritarian governments and rejected conservative morality. Writers emphasized individualism, feelings of personal expression, and emotional responses to life experience. Mary Shelley’s personal interactions with the Romantic writers Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, and William Blake strongly influenced Frankenstein and the young author even incorporated excerpts from Coleridge’s The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1798) into Frankenstein.

A prolific reader as a teenager, Mary Godwin Shelley read many Gothic novels including Beckford’s Vathek (1787), Radcliffe’s Mysteries of Udolpho (1794), and Lewis’s Tales of Terror (1799). The literary Gothic tradition began in 1754 with Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto. Known for incorporating mysterious elements into the text, Gothic novels frequently occur in creepy, far-away settings and feature supernatural characters, haunted houses, castles, darkness, death, curses, and secrets. Victor Frankenstein’s dark and secretive act of searching for body parts to use in his scientific research, as well as the novel’s locales of Switzerland, the Orkney Islands, and the Arctic, place Frankenstein firmly in the Gothic vein which continues through Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) and into many modern-day novels.

While Johannes Kepler’s Somnium (1634), a fantasy of lunar astronomy, and Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (1726) began the genre of science fiction, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and The Last Man (1826) coalesced to create the form of the modern-day science fiction novel. Marked by their use of scientific principles and modern technology, science fiction evolved through Jules Verne’s legacy, beginning with A Journey to the Centre of the Earth (1864), H.G. Wells’s The War of the Worlds (1898), to the “Golden Age of Science Fiction” (1930s-1950s) which includes Isaac Asimov’s Foundation series (1942-1950) and John W. Campbell’s popular science fiction magazine Astounding Science Fiction. Modern science fiction writers include Asimov (I, Robot, 1951), Arthur C. Clarke (2001: A Space Odyssey, 1967, and Venus Prime Series), Kurt Vonnegut (Slaughterhouse Five, 1969; Cat’s Cradle, 1963), and Michel Crichton (The Andromeda Strain, 1969; Jurassic Park, 1990).

Mary Shelley’s use of distant settings coupled with technological innovation places Frankenstein in the Romantic tradition of the Gothic novel and begins modern-day science fiction.
Comprehension Check: Exploring Expository Writing—Genre

Directions: After reading the article about genres, answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. What topics did the Romantic writers frequently incorporate into their work?
2. How did Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s personal relationship demonstrate their adherence to the personal values embraced by the Romantics? Refer to the biography of Mary Shelley for information regarding her personal relationship with Percy Shelley.
3. How does Mary Shelley incorporate aspects of the Gothic novel into Frankenstein?
4. Name a modern-day Gothic novel and explain how it continues in the Gothic tradition.
5. List two characteristics of science fiction novels.
6. Select your favorite science fiction novel or movie. Explain how it incorporates the aspects of science fiction.