Mary Shelley and Romanticism

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851), daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft.

Mary W. was a feminist, philosopher, and writer who was a pot-stirrer of her time (I mean that in a good way). She rubbed elbows with academics and thinkers and eventually met William Godwin, also a philosopher. At first, the two were not friends, then they became friends, and their friendship eventually evolved into an affair. She got pregnant and married so the baby (Mary) would be legitimate. They lived in adjoining houses rather than together, and Mary W. died a week after daughter Mary was born. William raised her with all the education and political ideals he held.

Mary S. married philosopher and poet Percy Shelley and together the two traveled through Europe and befriended like-minded romantics, like Lord Byron. It was on a summer retreat with Lord Byron in 1816 that Mary S. was inspired to write *Frankenstein*. It's said that they were sitting around a fire telling ghost stories and Lord Byron suggested everyone should write his and her own ghost story.

In addition to her own works, she edited and helped publish much of her husband's poetry. (Percy died in 1822.)

Romanticism: late 1700s-1850, followed the Enlightenment era, grounded in Bohemian ideals of improving oneself in spirit, soul, instincts, emotions, etc. Romanticism argues that humanity is less about science (logic and reason) and more about the experience (emotion-based).

John Locke argued that everyone is born a "blank slate" and we are shaped by our experiences, which is an idea promoted during the Romantics. Initially, these ideas were exhibited through poetry.

Romanticism promotes creativity, spontaneity, and self-expression. Ordinary things could be elevated to be viewed in an extraordinary way. **Where science is about making people cogs in a wheel for technological and industrial advancement, the romantics thought self-actualization was a worthy progression.** The individual's quest for success could be measured by personal achievement rather than some equation.

The Enlightenment Era correlated with the Industrial Age and great advancement in the science. Universities were sprouting, specialized studies were growing, and prominent philosophers helped change and shape new ideas about government. However, all of this hard work was said to have drained people's creativity.

In addition, the Industrial Revolution changed the face of business. The steam engine was invented in 1712, the spinning jenny was invented in 1764 (which spun multiple spools of thread or yarn at a time), a more efficient steam engine was created in 1769, the cotton gin was invented in 1794, and in 1844 the telegraph was invented. In 1849, the sewing machine was invented. All of this invention was exciting but it drastically changed how people worked and lived.

From all of this hard-core thinking, the Romantic period sought to get in touch with our softer side, the part of a person who longs to create something new and expressive.

Romanticism was also political. As the working force shifted, people felt less ownership and more like they were owned. The collective idea is that a society of happier people led to bigger ideas and greater progress.

In literature, Romantic ideals manifest as the individual journey, isolation of the narrator, invention and creation, and exotic and picturesque settings (an extension of Gothic themes).

Romantic themes in *Frankenstein*:
1. Quest for the Sublime: Victor's attempt to discover the secret of life, to become God-like, to make life with his own hands, wants to break through the bounds of life and death
2. Self-examination: Victor dwells in his grief and regret, causing physical sickness, repeatedly evaluates himself and his actions
3. Communication/Language: letter writing, excerpts from other works, the monster learning to read and speak, leaving messages on trees and rocks

Gothic themes in literature are characterized by ideas and characters that are dark in nature, mysteries and thrills, castles and faraway lands, supernatural elements, and an ongoing ominous feeling that something bad is going to happen.

Gothic themes in *Frankenstein*:
1. Extreme landscapes: the North Pole
2. Madness: Victor's passionate quest for the sublime ultimately leads him to madness and depression,
3. Darkness/Macabre/Gloom: Victor's journey to destroy the monster, death of many characters