Guide to Responding to Reading Questions on Frankenstein

Please note that answers will vary. Here are some sample responses.

1. For Freud, the uncanny derives its terror not from something external, alien, or unknown but from something strangely familiar which defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it. As he summarized, the uncanny “is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.” If you view Frankenstein as a cold distant father and the monster as an abandoned son, then Freud’s notion of familiarity followed by repression becomes an ideal lens to interact with the text. The monster can only evoke such fear within Frankenstein because he has spent days and weeks making him. The internal terror that Frankenstein feels throughout the text can easily be attributed to that knowledge.

2. Frankenstein reflects the so-called ‘Vitalist Controversy’ of 1814-15. This debate concerned the nature of what life was and whether modern science was in any way compatible with religious language. While Vitalists believed that modern medical science could explain much but it was still necessary to keep the idea of a substance beyond matter to understand the body, Materialists believed that physiology could explain the entire functioning of the body—no substance beyond matter was therefore necessary. Thus, one might read Shelley’s Frankenstein as an argument against Materialism and for the limits of science.

3. Throughout the text, it is the monster who views himself as a new Adam, rambling in the fields of Paradise, abandoned by his creator/father/God Frankenstein. Alternately, Frankenstein can be viewed as Adam in his recreation of the original sin; the acquisition of forbidden knowledge. Surely it is his drive to become godlike, to create a life outside of nature that sits at the center of his destruction and the destruction of everything he held dear.

4. Though Prometheus appears as part of the title, it is the only reference to the mythological character within the text. The references to electricity and lightning hark back to Prometheus incurring the wrath of the gods by stealing fire for mankind. Prometheus is also credited with creating the human race from clay. Prometheus is punished for stealing fire by being chained to a mountain in the Caucasus, where each day an eagle appears to eat away his liver, which renews itself for the eagle’s delection every day for thirty thousand years. Unlike Frankenstein, however, Prometheus never succumbs to his punishment. Instead of serving humanity, Frankenstein creates a monster that threatens its destruction. One might assume that Shelley’s modern Prometheus, Frankenstein, is a warning of man’s ultimate limitations.