Themes for Frankenstein

1. Ignorance is bliss. The power of human reason, through science and technology challenged many traditional precepts about the world and man's relationship with his creator. Shelley details this theme in her book, making an allusion to the counter-humanist idea in chapter four (Letters IV) when Victor warns Walton not to follow in his footsteps, saying, “Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow.” To Shelley and many others of her time, some riddles of nature should never be discovered by man. Those mysteries should be left alone. Even the alternate title, The Modern Prometheus, undeniably relates this point. Prometheus, a figure in Greek mythology, took fire from the gods in order to give it to man and consequently suffered eternal punishment. Clearly, Victor Frankenstein is this modern Prometheus— in a way, he stole the idea of creation from God and used it for his own ill-advised purposes.

2. Humans are cruel to those who are different. Human injustice towards outsiders breeds violence. The monster laments over man's cruelty to those who are different. Frankenstein's monster is an outcast—he doesn't belong in human society. Yet the monster's alienation from society, his unfulfilled desire for a companion with whom to share his life, and his ongoing struggle for revenge, are all shared by his creator. As the story develops, Victor becomes increasingly like his creation. Both live in relative isolation from society, both hate their own miserable lives, and both know suffering. Shelley, through this theme, paints a very bleak portrait of man and his relationship with outsiders, as well as the cruel vengeance of society.

3. Relationships are fragile. Many, if not all, of the relationships in Frankenstein end in pain and loss. This is especially true of those that are connected to Frankenstein. Perhaps by the inclusion of this anecdote of his parents, the author is attempting to illustrate that even though there is a chance of pain and loss whenever one enters a relationship, there is also a great benefit. The illustrations of Victor's father and Beaufort's relationship and then how Victor's father stepped in to not only save Caroline but eventually marry her serve to prove that even though there is a risk in any relationship, they are necessary and good. Conversely, the lack of human and compassion relationships causes the Creature to becomes cruel.

4. Selfishness is destructive. Consider Victor and his selfish scientific work. His scientific pursuits absorb him and its two years before he visits his family. As Victor attempts to create a human being, he progressively becomes less human. He tortures living creatures, neglects his family, haunts cemeteries. As his morals suffer, so does his health. He becomes pale and emaciated.

5. A last, subtler theme, indicts society for its sexist viewpoints. Throughout his narrative, Victor portrays women as weak, suffering, subservient beings who live for and depend on the men in their lives. Surely Shelley experienced this in her own life, though she may or may not have agreed with it. Ironically, the monster—the one who Victor calls a barbarian—has a very progressive notion of the opposite sex. He believes that men and women are largely equal, not being brought up in Frankenstein's pre-feminist culture. The monster's desire for a female companion does not convey a desire to rule over a woman or a belief that a woman should be dependent on him, but it simply shows his need for an equal companion with whom to share his sufferings.

Motifs:

- Consequences of irresponsibility in the pursuit of knowledge
- Consequences of pride
- Consequences of society's rejection of someone who is unattractive
- Destructive power of revenge, Frustration, Vengeance
- Parent-child conflicts
- Intolerance/Cruelty
- Sympathy
- Achievement, Sensitivitity
- Exile—what happens to a person pushed outside of society
- Responsibility or lack of responsibility
- Outcasts: The creature becomes more violent as a result from being shunned from society.
• Isolation: The solitary character in *Frankenstein* can apply to both the creator and his creation as they both live their lives in social isolation.

Literary Devices:
- **Irony:**
  - Creature is more sympathetic, more imaginative and more responsible to fellow creatures
  - Creature has many pleasing qualities but is an outcast because he’s not physically attractive
  - The monster ultimately controls the creator. The protagonist and his creation demonstrate an imagination ungoverned by moral values. Frankenstein’s creation questions the role of imagination in our lives and consequences of separating it from ethical implications. (A favorite horror device of the Gothic movement is finding a person trapped by his own circumstance.) He longs to destroy that which he desperately created
  - Mr. DeLacy, who is blind, recognizes the creatures compassion and friendship.

Allusions:
- Prometheus: benefactor of Mankind in Greek myth. Gave fire and technology to man. Father of civilization.
- Dr. Frankenstein as the maker of “Frankenstein” is a Modern Prometheus.
- He uses Science to probe the depths of nature and to steal the secret of life, just as Prometheus stole Fire from Zeus.
- Both Prometheus and Dr. Frankenstein are tragic victims on account of their “thefts” on behalf of civilization
- However, Prometheus is a martyr and Dr. Frankenstein is shown to be culpable.
- Like Prometheus, Victor was impatient with limitations and felt the universe held from humans something we deserve. Once we become intoxicated by the quest we will stop at nothing to get it. Promethean fever causes us to be dangerously out of touch with reality through the misuse of imagination and creativity.

Science and Nature:
- Excerpt: “As I stood at the door, on a sudden I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak, which stood about twenty yards from our house; and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared and nothing remained but a blasted stump. When we visited it the next morning, we found the tree shattered in a singular manner. IT was not splintered by the shock, but entirely reduced to thin ribbons of wood. I never beheld anything so utterly destroyed. The catastrophe of this tree excited my extreme astonishment. (p. 23)
- All science and natural phenomena are derived from nature. Nature is the ultimate creator of science. The problem is that as humans study and pick apart every aspect the bigger picture is lost to them, and nature no longer holds the prior beauty and amazement it once did. Throughout the book, all things connected with nature are depicted as innocent and sacred, whereas anything that man has meddled in comes out dangerous, abnormal, and abominable.

Hideous Progeny

“*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... His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing... [it] 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.”*
Overcome by the horror of what he has done, Victor Frankenstein abandons the "miserable monster" he fathered in his laboratory. That evening a nightmare disturbs his sleep; Elizabeth, his fiancée, becomes in his arms the decaying corpse of his own dead mother. The next morning when he returns to his "workshop of filthy creation," the monster has escaped.

The creature loses all hope of companionship when Frankenstein refuses to create a female counterpart, but Victor looks forward to joys of married life with Elizabeth.

The Creature is torn between his intense desire for friendship and his knowledge that his appearance causes humans to flee in horror or attack him. In learning about the history of people in different nations and literature, his ambivalence toward humans is increased. He admires human virtue, but hates vice.

As Frankenstein’s rational capacity deteriorates, he is increasingly overwhelmed by emotion. Frankenstein is a man of keen intellect and sensitivity whose rational powers become undone by an excess of ambition and by the horrifying product of that ambition—the Creature. Frankenstein becomes revengeful when he realizes the Creature has killed others.

Victor is melodramatic—he goes to extremes in emotion, including weeping, dismay, disillusion, and finally resignation to circumstance. It’s characteristic of Victor to collapse at the moments that overwhelm his sensibilities. Although he is capable of spending months locked away in his lab reviving corpses, he quails at the consequences and goes into madness and self-destruction. After Victor’s extensive confession to Robert, Victor is relieved of the emotional burden he has recklessly imposed on himself. He dies far from the home he destroyed because of his ill-advised interest in stealing secrets of the universe.

About the Creature: In many ways, the monster himself is a metaphor for Victor’s life. Indeed, Frankenstein’s monster is an outcast—he doesn’t belong in human society. Yet the monster’s alienation from society, his unfulfilled desire for a companion with whom to share his life, and his ongoing struggle for revenge, are all shared by his creator. As the story develops, Victor becomes increasingly like his creation. Both live in relative isolation from society, both hate their own miserable lives, and both know suffering.

Sickness: Throughout Frankenstein, several characters, but especially Victor, grow sick during periods of extreme stress. Frankenstein demonstrates such illness after he creates the monster and especially after his friend, Clerval, dies. Other characters, such as his mother and father, also experience extreme sickness, yet to Victor, at least, sickness serves as an escape from life’s harsh reality. It also seems to foreshadow horrible, future events—Victor always seems to realize the terrible hold fate has over him.

Weather/Nature: The weather also serves as a quiet metaphor throughout the novel. Like sickness, it too, foreshadows coming events. For example, the storm of the night of William’s murder seems to foreshadow the impending misery brought on by the monster. Both Victor and the monster have their spirits lifted during warm weather. To Victor, the Alps are a place of self-reflection and spiritual awakening. Yet the cold, stormy weather (the arctic north near the end of the story, for example, or the rain storm on Victor’s wedding night), indicates deep depression and thoughts of death, underscoring how desperate Victor’s and the monster’s circumstances have become while reminding them of their impending doom. Clearly, the weather corresponds to the characters’ attitudes. Likewise, Victor’s love but eventual disillusionment with nature reveals his love and disillusionment with life itself, after the monster makes his life a living nightmare. As always, Frankenstein’s love turns to contempt and self-loathing as his creature grows increasingly vengeful.
Sample Essay:

In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein made many choices that were far from wise. As a result of his actions, his dreams were crushed and his life eventually taken from him. His creation, deemed a monster by the ideals of society, was left without a source of guidance or comfort, and therefore became forever fixated upon his beginning.

While Victor Frankenstein may be seen as the main character of the novel, his creation is truly the fuel for action and motion throughout the work. Because he is spurned by society due to his appearance, he has little hope for a future other than solitude and separation. He is therefore forced to dwell on his past; Victor and his abandonment.

Although his existence is wretched, the monster in actuality has quite a benevolent nature. The first part of his life he hopes for redemption, and believes he can achieve it. His memory of Victor fuels the need and want of a family.

However, most of the action in the novel is caused by the monster’s rage. He is forced to re-live his initial abandonment by the rejection of the family he watches, and Victor’s constant spurning of him. He begins to haunt Victor, much like the memory of his maker has been haunting him for the entirety of his existence. But unlike a memory, the monster can do physical harm. His hatred of Victor manifests itself in the murder of Victor’s most dearly loved ones. Victor’s younger brother, one of the servants, Clerval, Elizabeth, and several other characters, some not related to Victor, all lose their lives as a result of the monster’s actions. His inability to get over his troubled past cause Victor’s life and his own, to become full of misery and destruction.

Had Victor not abandoned him, or the family he watched taken him in, perhaps the monster would have behaved differently, but as it stands, he is one of the most dynamic characters in the novel. Not only does he cause the movement in the plot, but he also undergoes many changes himself. His tie to Victor seems unbreakable, and it is so, but his reaction to it shifts all throughout the novel. In the close of the novel, there is a chance for reconciliation, but due to Victor’s untimely death, it is impossible. However, the death of Victor, and what had been the driving reason of his life, caused him to break free from the cycle, and instead of murdering others, he did so to himself.

The monster’s strong tie to his troubling past essentially is the novel. All of the action spawns from this source, whether being carried out by the monster or Victor’s reaction to the monster. The past is the force that cause change in both characters, and without it, the meaning of the work as a whole would be irreconcilably altered.