Organizational Patterns

This book has an interesting organizational pattern. The book is technically divided into three separate volumes (though you would be hard-pressed to find them in separate novels these days). Each volume is broken up into chapters. It is interesting to note that the first volume actually starts with letters from Robert Walton to his sister Elizabeth Saville. This allowed Shelley to set up a frame to the story (see Frame Story below). Chapter 7 of Volume 3 ends with more letters from Walton to Saville, wrapping up Frankenstein’s story that started in media res.

Issues Related to the Study of Literature

Frame Story

The Frame in this story is centered around Robert Walton, a sailor/adventurer seeking renown in certain experiments up in the Arctic. We find this out through a series of letters written to his sister. During his trip, he comes across Frankenstein who is in poor health due to his long journey alone into the cold. He asks Frankenstein what brought him up here and finds that he was chasing after someone (his creation). After nursing Frankenstein back to health and becoming great friends, Frankenstein decides to tell him the whole of his story.

There is a second, much shorter, framed story in the narrative of the monster to Frankenstein. Near the beginning of the second volume, the monster takes control of the story to relate his own experiences. At this time, he tells the story of a family of cottagers and their plight as they were exiled from France for trying to help Safie and her father.

Point of View

Again the Frame Story sets up mainly a double perspective: one of Robert Walton, the other of Victor Frankenstein himself (as supposedly recorded by Walton). Essentially, the Letters in the story are directed by Walton and the Chapters are directed by Frankenstein. In many ways, we see the story through this lens. For instance, Frankenstein looks back on his creation with great disdain and abhorrence, though the creature himself may not be as grotesque as we are led to believe. Similarly, when Frankenstein’s monster takes control of the narrative, we must wonder how much we are to truly understand of the story as it now passes through 3 individuals before arrive to us (the monster to Frankenstein to Walton). Walton never interrupts Frankenstein’s tale, but he does return at the end to complete it. Shelley also often interjects letters during chapters (pp. 46-49) to show others’ points of view (i.e. Elizabeth).
Themes

• “The Modern Prometheus”—Prometheus was the god that created man out of clay. It was his decision to steal fire and give it to men that led to the creation of Pandora and her descendents. The sole purpose of this creation was that they should afflict and torment mankind.

• The divine power of nature—Frankenstein finds a great sublime element in nature, similar to that of the transcendentalist movement (see ch. 9-10).

• The failure in trying to recreate that power (the monster)—The power of nature is marred by Frankenstein’s creation. This “unnatural” being brings him nothing but disgust. This is highly suggestive of the fall of man (or at least his incapability for perfection). He is unable to fully create what nature had.

• Responsibility—All of Frankenstein’s woes are due to a lack of responsibility for his actions. He hides what he has done and shuns the creation he has made.

• Isolation and acceptance—Frankenstein, his monster, and Walton all must deal with bouts of isolation and seeking acceptance from others.

Setting

• On a ship bound to the Arctic.

• The University of Ingolstadt, Germany.

• At times elsewhere, often as told in letters.

Foreshadowing

Since we come across Frankenstein’s tale in media res, he constantly gives clues to what will happen in the future and what will happen in the future-past.

• As he describes his schooling, he constantly keeps referring to his studies as “the fatal impulse that led to my ruin.” (p. 24)

• By that same token, he often refers to his studies as “fatal” even though he is not dead (yet).

Allusion

Shelley constantly refers to other texts throughout the work. Most notably among these is Milton’s Paradise Lost, which the monster has an opportunity to read. See the section “Background Information” for more.

Affective Issues Related to the Work

There is a distinct sense of isolation and loneliness that Frankenstein suffers from throughout the whole of his tale. He is surrounded by friends and family who love him and want to help him, yet he feels it necessary to hide his horrid tale from everyone (until Walton comes).

Similarly, Frankenstein leaves his creation in isolation. Rather than claiming it and raising it as a parent would its child, he runs from it. This abandonment furthers this feeling of isolation as the monster comes to know the peasants by whom he resides. He sees their relationships and sees that he himself has none.

Thomas Reyes-Cairo, 2008, BYU
It is interesting to note that, despite that he “determined, once, that the memory of these evils should die with me,” he decides to tell Walton about them. Frankenstein sees something of himself in Walton (eg. someone seeking after wisdom, knowledge, and success). He feels that by telling his tale to Walton, he might help him to avoid a similar tragedy.

Vocabulary Issues
Since the novel was written in 1830, some of the vocabulary can be unfamiliar to students. Some of this can be overcome simply by picking the right edition of the novel. At least two versions of the novel that I have come across have definitions of certain terms.

Examples
syndics: legislators
plain work: basic sewing
cabriole: small carriage

Still other terms probably need some clarification.
Examples
chapel house
convalescence
preambulation
despondency
distillation
prognosticated

The novel is written in a very educated style of English. It is exemplary, prescriptively speaking, for sentence structure and grammar. This may be a good thing and can definitely be a bad thing for most students, urging statements like “Who even talks like this anymore?”

Background Knowledge
As we learn about Frankenstein’s studies, the text requires some previous knowledge of the great thinkers before his time. We must understand the works of people like Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, Paracelsus, etc. These scientists dabbled in many of the dark and mysterious arts during their studies. While Shelley tries to explain this, going over these briefly could further help students to understand what led Frankenstein to dabble with reanimation.

The allusions in this text to other texts are astounding in quantity. Everything from Milton’s Paradise Lost, to Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner, to Dante’s Inferno. And the list goes on. Good readers of the times would have caught these allusions without difficulty, but chances are that modern students would not be as well
versed in these classics. While not necessary for comprehension of the story, reviewing relevant excerpts from these works could help significantly.

Most student will come to the book with a fair amount of background knowledge, but misconceptions abound relating the identity of “Frankenstein.” Is he the doctor? Is he the monster? Does the monster have bolts in his neck? Is the monster inherently ugly or ugly by nature of his creation? Popular culture has taken the name “Frankenstein” and attached a certain idea with it. It might be helpful to have students activate that knowledge about the image of Frankenstein for later discussion.

Implications for Students of Diversity
One of the main ideas in the novel centers around the idea of isolation and wanting to fit in. Frankenstein’s monster seeks out his own identity and also acknowledgment from his creator. It is Frankenstein’s lack of care towards his creation that causes all of the grief and pain he later suffers from. We all, at one time or another, strive to fit in to society. It is when we are unable to do so that the most damage to our self-esteem occurs. We feel that we are too different from others to be acceptable. In Frankenstein’s case, all of his troubles could have been solved had he accepted his creation—not as something distinct from himself, but as an intelligent being. So, too, we must learn to see past differences and diversities to draw together as a society of humankind.

Gender Issues
Safie vs. All other female characters: Mary Shelley portrays most of her female characters in a very passive manner. The women (Elizabeth, specifically) are submissive before the male figures that surround them. All of them except Safie. Her story, interjected in by Frankenstein’s monster, deeply contrasts with that of Elizabeth. Unbound by the strict customs of her upbringing, Safie flees the whims of her father and the expectations of her society to find happiness in her own desires for marriage with Felix. Elizabeth, by contrast, has had her marriage planned out since the day she was taken in by her aunt and uncle. She spends a vast part of the novel waiting and worrying about Victor. Ultimately she loses her life because of his decisions.

The Central Question or Enduring Issue
Is wisdom/knowledge/fame always a good thing? Can it go too far?

Stepping back to the subtitle (“The Modern Prometheus”), we have to wonder how our efforts might lead us in a direction that we never intended. While Prometheus was considered an extremely intelligent being, he constantly sought to undermine the authority of those above him. His clever tricks played on Zeus led to misery for mankind and captivity for himself.
Frankenstein easily finds himself in the same position, as does Robert Walton later on in the novel. Frankenstein, a man overstretched by his pursuit of knowledge and fame, nearly drags Walton down the same path (p. 177). In the end, though, Walton is moved to reason by his shipmates and abandons what he had so long hoped for.

Research Issues/Project Ideas
• Working on the Central Questions above, students could write a paper based on a controversial scientific issue (global warming, stem cell research, etc.). They could write it like a research paper or a newspaper editorial.
• Relate to the students the circumstances for Shelley when she wrote Frankenstein (a contest among friends for writing ghost stories). Propose that your class do the same. The winner (selected by the teacher, the class, or both) will be published--with the writer’s permission, of course, in a class collection of previous years’ winners. These can then be used as examples as you teach the novel in the future. Optional: Read to them (or assign as reading) one of the stories in Fantasmagoriana, the short stories that inspired the Shelleys, and Lord Byron to enter into this contest. Warning: This project may not be a good idea, depending on the maturity level of the class and your tolerance as a teacher for violence in writing. Ghost stories can quickly turn into horror stories.
• For any of these projects above: After talking to students about allusions and giving some of the examples from Frankenstein, have students practice writing their own allusions to later be incorporated into their writing.
• Frankenstein in pop culture: While Frankenstein and his monster may not be the most central figures in pop culture history, there have been quite a few media outlets that have drawn inspiration from Mary Shelley’s work. Have the students research different things that have taken cues from the text. Have them create a text-and-image collage to demonstrate what they’ve found.

Informational/Functional Texts
• Depending on your school’s budget and whether or not they already have stock in the book, I would highly suggest getting the Longman Cultural Edition of Frankenstein. For your own sake, it might be a good idea to get a copy of it as it contains relevant contextual information after the story finishes. It has excerpts of Paradise Lost, Rime of the Ancient Mariner, and much more. Essentially, if you intend to teach anything about the background of the book or any of its allusions, this book has done your research for you. It’s pretty cheap for a personal copy and can be found (as of 9/2008) online at Amazon.com. This version is the one I reference above for page numbers.
• Alfred Lord Tennyson’s Ulysses
• A map, to show the distance Frankenstein travels for his revenge.