

Examples of Possible MA Exam Questions

Listed below are a series of questions that a student might encounter on the MA Exam if Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* were on the official reading list. (Disclaimer: the list does *not* include any questions that have been or will be on the exit exam. Instead, it offers types of questions students may encounter. Furthermore, faculty reserve the right to ask types of questions not specifically identified in this mock-up.)

Possible question #1:

At the center of all the narrative frames in *Frankenstein* is the tale of Safie, a young Turkish girl who is adopted by the DeLaceys (Walton's letters introduce Victor's monologue, a monologue that relates the Creature's rejoinder to his maker, a rejoinder that just so happens to include the story of the DeLaceys and Safie). What function does this triply embedded story serve in the highly complex narrative?

Note about possible question #1 (and all questions that will follow): Like all advanced queries in English Studies, there is no one right or wrong answer to this question. Instead, there are a series of possible answers that require the respondent to display his/her knowledge of literary history, genre, and the work itself.

Possible strategies for answering question #1:

- Focus on standard readings. *Frankenstein* is a novel of dark "doubles." The most obvious doppelgangers are Victor and the Creature he fashions in his "workshop of filthy creation," but there are many other doublings within the tale. Safie, the beautiful woman who travels to the DeLacey home, can be seen as a "double" of the Creature himself. Both are outsiders to an occidental family, and both are educated in the humble cottage. While the physically charming Safie is embraced by the family, the hideous Creature is reviled, even though many of his selfless labors have helped them survive the harsh winter. To make this focus work, you'll need to articulate what function this particular doubling serves (you could relate the doubling to the novel's recurrent juxtaposition of beauty and ugliness, you could argue that Felix and Agatha's expulsion of the Creature they had called an "angel" renders them more blind than their father, or you could use this pairing to show how and why the novel differentiates the "inhuman" Creature from his human counterparts).
- Focus on debates in existing scholarship. Long after Mary Jacobus asked if there was a "woman in the text," scholars continue to ponder what sorts of women are in *Frankenstein* and what the presence of these women may say about the novel's relationship to feminism. Safie is a seemingly strong and self-directed woman who is able to defy the oppression of her father because she listens to the lessons of her mother, but she flees one despotic household to willingly become part of a benevolent patriarchy. Additionally, she has no real voice in the tale, as her story is only narrated by the (male) Creature. Safie's narrative arc could thus be used as (a) "proof" of the fact that there are strong "feminist" characters in the novel, (b) evidence for the claim that the novel ultimately "silences" women, or (c) justification for a charge of gendered ambivalence, as the novel appears to give

women as much agency as it takes away. What would be important here is not the individual claim (a, b or c), but your support for it (support that would include at least an implicit definition of feminism and a discussion of other female characters within the novel).

- Focus on themes. *Frankenstein* may not officially be a bildungsroman, but it is deeply concerned with the role of education in personal formation. Victor is largely defined through his self-study, and the Creature is only able to become an autodidact after he attends to the language and history lessons the DeLaceys provide Safie. Last, but not least, Safie blossoms under the tutelage of the DeLaceys. To make an argument regarding theme, though, you'll have to explain what the recurrent presence of education and educational efforts means in the text. Remember that 'theme as topic' only applies to compositional essays. When you're dealing with creative texts, you need to discuss the implied ideas that are expressed in works, and these ideas are not evident in just a common topic or a list of points. Safie's story, therefore, doesn't exemplify the 'theme of education in *Frankenstein*' (there is no such theme because creative texts do not have main ideas); rather, Safie's story suggests that education should be a communal endeavor wherein people come together to achieve a common goal (and good). (The lone scholars wreck havoc on the world whereas Safie is comfortably assimilated into her new family.) Looked at another way, Safie's story also suggests the superiority of western culture in regards to female education. Safie's mother taught her daughter to expect more than the harem, and the DeLaceys offer their adopted daughter all the information they possess in order to make her a more suitable helpmeet for Felix. (Bonus points if you note the thematic parallels between Shelley's tale of despotism thwarted and her own mother's arguments in favor of female education in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.)
- Focus on generic conventions. The Gothic novel (note: Gothic is the mode, novel is the genre) is at least partially typified by frame narratives, so the embedded story could be explained by modal or generic constraints alone. Such a claim could argue that the particular story of Safie doesn't have to mean any one thing in particular, as the Gothic tends to rely on a "Russian doll" (or "Chinese box"—choose whichever metaphor suits you) structure where stories are piled on top of one another, often to the point of narrative exhaustion. What matters is not so much the "exhausted" story itself but the fact that there is a tale that ultimately defies full explanation or documentation. Most Gothics convey this narrative exhaustion in and through crumbling documents that cannot be deciphered, but the proffered letters, that are never read or transcribed, could serve the same function here. We get Safie's story, but only as it is narrated by the Creature to Frankenstein—the actual "proof" of her tale is forever out of reach, so, one could argue, it is ultimately unable to be fully related in the novel. To make this argument work, you'll need to offer many more characteristics of the Gothic that *Frankenstein* embodies to "prove" that the novel fits in this mode. Once you've secured that, you can then convincingly claim that the story doesn't have to "mean" one thing in particular—it is just a nod to formal conventions.

Possible question #2

In an admittedly dense reading of *Frankenstein*, Scott Juengel contends that the “portrait—at once the instrument and aim of physiognomic perception—comes to herald death in Shelley’s text, thereby suggesting a metonymic connection between image and corpse, a connection realized in a creature born of dead flesh” (356). Focusing on the two specific portraits of Caroline Frankenstein mentioned in the novel (the large painting commissioned by Alphonse Frankenstein and the miniature in the locket), make a case for or against Juengel’s argument.

Note about question #2: Like possible question #1, this question is open-ended. The specific form of the query, though, limits possible answers to one of two varieties—“yes, I agree” or “no, I do not.” When you are posed with such a question, make sure that you address the specific query and tailor your response to the criticism quoted in the question itself.

Note #2 about question #2: Questions that ask students about specific critics, important articles, or contested definitions will always provide the necessary context for the query within the question itself. Notice, for example, that you do not have to be familiar with Juengel’s article overall to be able to answer this question. What matters here is not your familiarity with the critic, but your ability to accurately read the question and provide an argumentative response to it.

Possible strategies for answering question #2:

- Argue for the claim. The miniature portrait “heralds death” in two ways—(1) it signals William’s demise (we only hear that he carried the locket with his mother’s portrait everywhere when he is missing), and (2) it secures Justine’s fatal punishment (she’s charged with killing the boy because the locket was found on her). The large portrait, though, is less obvious. You need to tell your reader that the portrait is a romanticized reconceptualization of Caroline’s life immediately before her father’s death (and her rescue by Alphonse Frankenstein), so it is an eternal reminder that death is coming to Caroline’s family.
- Argue against the claim. The miniature portrait is only one piece of evidence that indicts Justine. Justine proclaims her own guilt and argues that she has destroyed the child because she did not protect him. She was therefore not killed as a result of the fatal locket alone. Additionally, the large portrait of Caroline does not herald death. Her father is dead when it is painted (so it retroactively records rather than heralds his death), and the particulars of the scene do not exactly spell out how she will die. Furthermore, it is not clear how a memorial of her father’s death can also serve as a precursor of her own, as she did not die in the same situation as her father.

Possible question #3:

Like Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*, *Frankenstein* was produced during the Romantic era in British literature. What Romantic characteristics does the novel share with Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s poetic collection?

Note for possible question #3: Be prepared to discuss works on the reading list in relation to one another. Note which works are produced during the same literary period, look for similarities in genre and mode, and mark any potential overlap in theme. As this question shows, *Frankenstein* can be linked to *Lyrical Ballads* via literary period. As an exemplar of the type of English novel that was produced before the advent of realism, it can be compared/contrasted with Eliot’s realistic *Middlemarch*, and as an embodiment

of the Gothic mode, it can be related to Morrison's *Beloved*. A reviewer interested in thematic treatments of revenge could ask you to compare *Frankenstein* to *Hamlet*, just as one interested in discussions of monstrosity could ask you to look at the Creature in relation to Melville's depiction of the white whale (or even Ahab himself).

General strategy for answering question #3:

- Have a good working definition of British Romanticism at your disposal and show us what elements of Romanticism each work embodies. Mark any points of overlap, making a case for any perceived commonalities. Also, don't forget to mention that Shelley includes quotations from some of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* in her novel.

General advice for test-taking:

When you provide answers for each one of the questions you choose on the MA exit exam, you should:

- **clearly address and adequately answer the prompt** (respond squarely to the question asked and concentrate on developing a coherent response to that specific question)
- **maintain a clear focus** (stay on target throughout your essay—restate what the prompt asks in your introduction, offer an answer to the question posed, then include topic sentences that tie directly back to your thesis)
- **use literary terminology properly** (know the basic terms that apply to each work and make sure that your working definitions are accurate and current—revisit Holman & Harmon or any other good literary handbook/dictionary if you need to have your memory jogged)
- **develop an argument in support of your stated thesis** (make sure that all textual reference is relevant and appropriate to your argument, not mere summary—also, remember to offer analysis after every bit of textual evidence to show how you are interpreting that evidence)
- **keep your essay free from factual error** (self-explanatory)
- **keep your essay free from grammatical, syntactical and mechanical problems** (self-explanatory)

One final note: We know that you do not have the works in front of you. If the question cannot be answered without reference to a particular passage, we will provide the passage in the exam itself. We are not looking for quotation or for memorized lines, and there is therefore no need for particular citations. The evidence that we want is general evidence that demonstrates that that you read and understood the work(s) in question.