On a stormy, windswept night in 1815, a young, eighteen-year-old girl had a vivid nightmare.

The nightmare was dreadful and deeply distressing, but it gave her an idea for a tale – (1) a tale that would become the most recognized horror story in the world: the story of Frankenstein’s monster.

The novel recounts the trials of an ambitious young scientist, Dr Frankenstein, who uses his knowledge to bring an inanimate body to life, but then rejects the shocking ‘monster’ he creates. At the time of writing, the story was a powerful warning against scientific advances and (2) the Industrial Revolution, which was about to spread across Europe. Many artists and writers were concerned about this industrialization and (3) the effect it would have on man’s relationship with nature. They saw danger in the new scientific advances and a worrying desire to ‘play God’.
The author of Frankenstein was called Mary Shelley (1797–1851), and for many it was hard to believe that a young girl could write such a shocking story. But Mary was no ordinary eighteen-year-old. Her father, William Godwin, was a well-known philosopher and novelist, and her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was a famous feminist. Unfortunately for Mary, her mother died shortly after she was born, but Mary inherited her rebellious spirit. At sixteen, she secretly ran away to France and then to Switzerland with the writer Percy Shelley, who was later to achieve fame as a romantic poet. In Switzerland, the couple stayed with the poet Lord Byron, and in the evenings they often entertained themselves by reading ghost stories. After a while, Byron suggested they write their own, and (4) Mary decided she was going to write about her nightmare.

Mary’s life with Percy was passionate and brief. When he died in a storm in Italy in 1822, Mary returned to England with her son and continued writing until her death in 1851. But Frankenstein lived on and, almost 200 years later, it’s still influencing and inspiring contemporary popular culture.

B

Volume 1 Chapter 4

It was on a dreary night in November that I completed my work. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me that I might inject a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain fell dismally against the window panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the failing light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a sudden movement agitated its limbs. How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how to describe the terrible wretch I had tried to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God!
His yellow skin scarcely covered the muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was black and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness that formed a horrid contrast with his watery eyes, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of breathing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health, but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the appearance of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room and spent a long time pacing around my bed-chamber, unable to sleep. At length tiredness overtook me, and I threw myself on the bed in my clothes, trying to find a few moments of forgetfulness. But it was in vain; I slept, indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams. […] I started from my sleep with horror; a cold sweat covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb was tense; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, I beheld the wretch, the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, as if to keep me there, but I escaped and rushed downstairs. I took refuge in the courtyard belonging to the house which I inhabited, where I remained during the rest of the night, listening attentively, fearing each sound as if it were the approach of the monster to which I had so miserably given life.