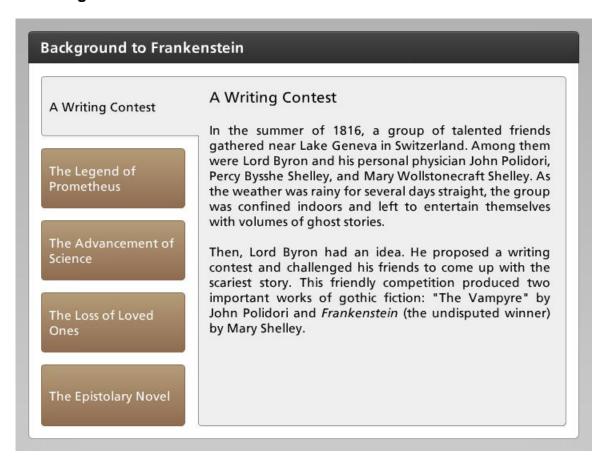## Introduction

The story of *Frankenstein* explores the dangers of pushing the limits of science and nature to create new life before considering the consequences and responsibilities inherent in such a daring pursuit. In this interactivity, click each of the tabs to learn background information behind the novel.

A Writing Contest

Background to Frankenstein

A Writing Contest

A Writing Contest

The Legend of Prometheus

The Advancement of Science

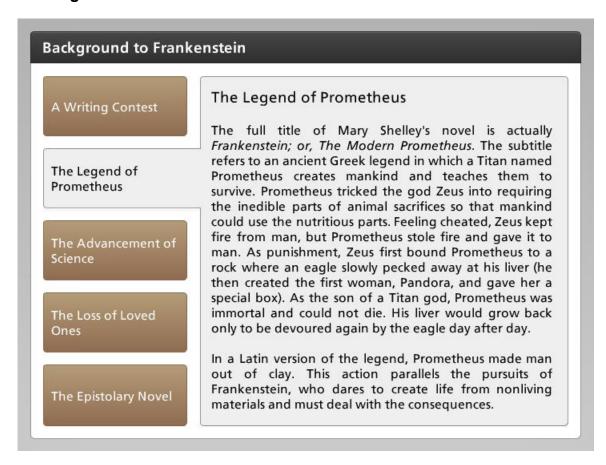The Loss of Loved Ones

The Epistolary Novel

In the summer of 1816, a group of talented friends gathered near Lake Geneva in Switzerland. Among them were Lord Byron and his personal physician John Polidori, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. As the weather was rainy for several days straight, the group was confined indoors and left to entertain themselves with volumes of ghost stories.

Then, Lord Byron had an idea. He proposed a writing contest and challenged his friends to come up with the scariest story. This friendly competition produced two important works of gothic fiction: "The Vampyre" by John Polidori and *Frankenstein* (the undisputed winner) by Mary Shelley.

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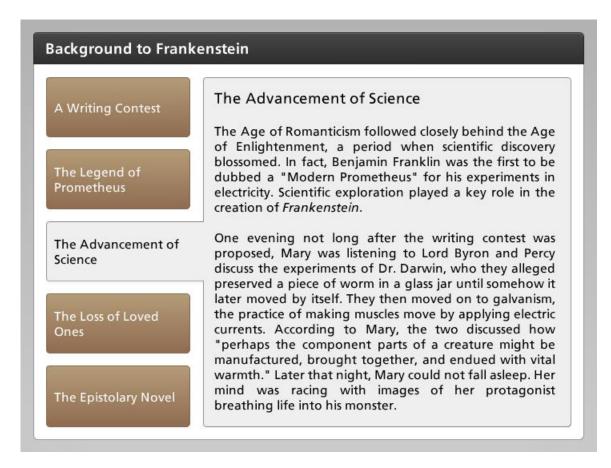The Epistolary Novel

The Legend of Prometheus

The full title of Mary Shelley's novel is actually *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. The subtitle refers to an ancient Greek legend in which a Titan named Prometheus creates mankind and teaches them to survive. Prometheus tricked the god Zeus into requiring the inedible parts of animal sacrifices so that mankind could use the nutritious parts. Feeling cheated, Zeus kept fire from man, but Prometheus stole fire and gave it to man. As punishment, Zeus first bound Prometheus to a rock where an eagle slowly pecked away at his liver (he then created the first woman, Pandora, and gave her a special box). As the son of a Titan god, Prometheus was immortal and could not die. His liver would grow back only to be devoured again by the eagle day after day.

In a Latin version of the legend, Prometheus made man out of clay. This action parallels the pursuits of Frankenstein, who dares to create life from nonliving materials and must deal with the consequences.

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The Advancement of Science

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A Writing Contest

The Legend of Prometheus

The Advancement of Science

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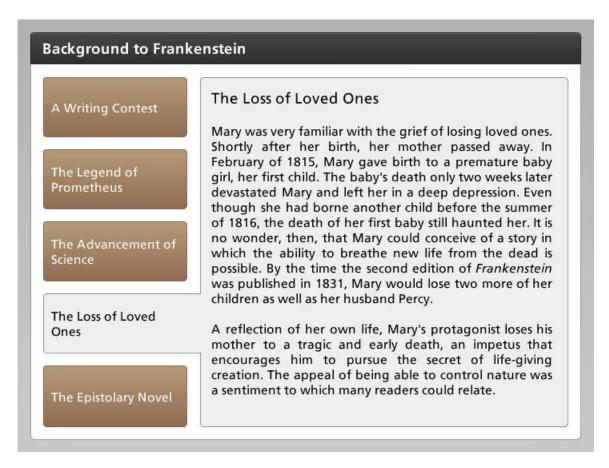The Epistolary Novel

The Advancement of Science

The Age of Romanticism followed closely behind the Age of Enlightenment, a period when scientific discovery blossomed. In fact, Benjamin Franklin was the first to be dubbed a "Modern Prometheus" for his experiments in electricity. Scientific exploration played a key role in the creation of *Frankenstein*.

One evening not long after the writing contest was proposed, Mary was listening to Lord Byron and Percy discuss the experiments of Dr. Darwin, who they alleged preserved a piece of worm in a glass jar until somehow it later moved by itself. They then moved on to galvanism, the practice of making muscles move by applying electric currents. According to Mary, the two discussed how "perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth." Later that night, Mary could not fall asleep. Her mind was racing with images of her protagonist breathing life into his monster.

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The Legend of Prometheus

The Advancement of Science

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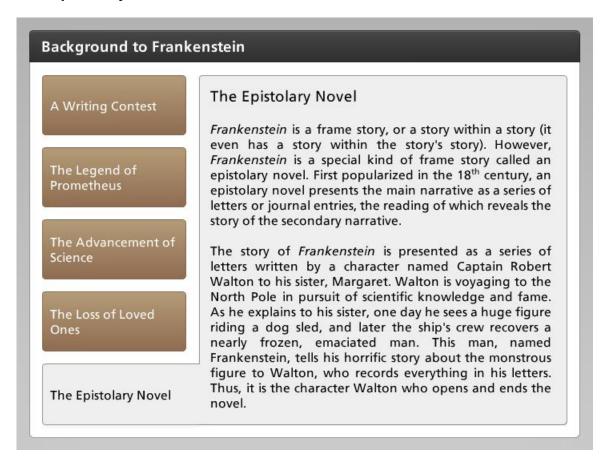
The Epistolary Novel

The Loss of Loved Ones

Mary was very familiar with the grief of losing loved ones. Shortly after her birth, her mother passed away. In February of 1815, Mary gave birth to a premature baby girl, her first child. The baby's death only two weeks later devastated Mary and left her in a deep depression. Even though she had borne another child before the summer of 1816, the death of her first baby still haunted her. It is no wonder, then, that Mary could conceive of a story in which the ability to breathe new life from the dead is possible. By the time the second edition of *Frankenstein* was published in 1831, Mary would lose two more of her children as well as her husband Percy.

A reflection of her own life, Mary's protagonist loses his mother to a tragic and early death, an impetus that encourages him to pursue the secret of life-giving creation. The appeal of being able to control nature was a sentiment to which many readers could relate.

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The Epistolary Novel

Frankenstein is a frame story, or a story within a story (it even has a story within the story's story). However, *Frankenstein* is a special kind of frame story called an epistolary novel. First popularized in the 18th century, an epistolary novel presents the main narrative as a series of letters or journal entries, the reading of which reveals the story of the secondary narrative.

The story of *Frankenstein* is presented as a series of letters written by a character named Captain Robert Walton to his sister, Margaret. Walton is voyaging to the North Pole in pursuit of scientific knowledge and fame. As he explains to his sister, one day he sees a huge figure riding a dog sled, and later the ship's crew recovers a nearly frozen, emaciated man. This man, named Frankenstein, tells his horrific story about the monstrous figure to Walton, who records everything in his letters. Thus, it is the character Walton who opens and ends the novel.