

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KIERSTEN WHITE

THE  
DARK  
DESCENT  
OF  
ELIZABETH  
FRANKENSTEIN

“Exquisitely disturbing. . .  
A beautiful tapestry of horror,  
sewn together with threads of  
madness, obsession, and murder.”  
—STEPHANIE GARBER,  
internationally bestselling  
author of *Caraval*

Photo © 2018 by Christine Blackburne

DISCUSSION GUIDE

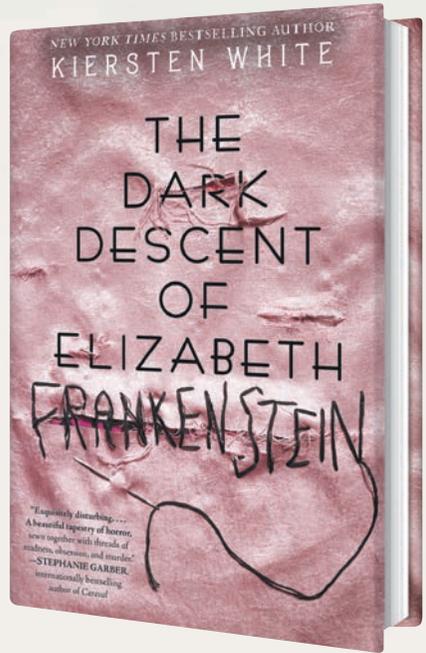
## ABOUT THE BOOK

The Frankenstein legend as you've never seen it before, told by *New York Times* bestselling author Kiersten White! You will not be able to put down this stunning and dark reimagining of the Mary Shelley classic told from the point of view of Elizabeth, Victor Frankenstein's adopted sister.

Elizabeth Lavenza hasn't had a proper meal in weeks. Her thin arms are covered with bruises from her "caregiver," and she is on the verge of being thrown into the streets . . . until she is brought to the home of Victor Frankenstein, an unsmiling, solitary boy who has everything—except a friend.

Victor is her escape from misery. Elizabeth does everything she can to make herself indispensable—and it works. She is taken in by the Frankenstein family and rewarded with a warm bed, delicious food, and dresses of the finest silk. Soon she and Victor are inseparable.

But her new life comes at a price. As the years pass, Elizabeth's survival depends on managing Victor's dangerous temper and entertaining his every whim, no matter how depraved. Behind her blue eyes and sweet smile lies the calculating heart of a girl determined to stay alive no matter the cost . . . as the world she knows is consumed by darkness.



Grades 7 and up

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Blue Lilly Photo

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kiersten White is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the *And I Darken* series, comprised of *And I Darken*, *Now I Rise*, and *Bright We Burn*; the *Paranormalcy* series; *Slayer*, and many more novels. She lives with her family near the ocean in San Diego, which, in spite of its perfection, spurs her to dream of faraway places and even further-away times. For more information, visit: [kierstenwhite.com](http://kierstenwhite.com) and follow Kiersten on Twitter @kierstenwhite and Instagram @authorkierstenwhite.

## TEACHER GUIDE, ARRANGED BY THEME

The following questions are arranged by theme and may be used as writing prompts or as questions for class discussion and reflection.

### IDENTITY

1. Elizabeth's past is often juxtaposed with her present through flashbacks to childhood moments. What effect does her childhood have on her current conflicts and circumstances?
2. Elizabeth notes that Victor's mother "present[ed her] to Victor as his special gift" (p. 11). Why does she accept being gifted to this stranger? What does this reveal about Elizabeth's character? How does this affect the development of Elizabeth's identity? How might it affect her future?
3. When Victor is killing a deer, Elizabeth stands by and watches without trying to stop him. She then takes in the scene and says, "*Red leaves. Red knife. Red hands. But white dresses always*" (p. 79). What does this reveal about the relationship between Victor and Elizabeth? What is the understanding between them? Why does Victor always want Elizabeth to wear white, and why does she mention this in this particular flashback? What else might Elizabeth be trying to show about the way Victor wants to see her? Does she create her identity to please him?
4. After Henry proposes, Elizabeth is conflicted about how she would behave as his potential wife, saying, "*Who I truly was remained a mystery even to me*" (p. 104). What does Elizabeth mean by this? Who is Elizabeth Lavenza?
5. As Elizabeth realizes she cannot save Justine, she laments, "I would lose my Justine for nothing. Would lose the one person I had tried to save in the midst of a life spent selfishly trying to make certain I stayed safe myself. The one person I love because she made me happy, rather than because my security depended on her" (p. 170). How does this showcase a shift in Elizabeth's character? Why is she so affected by the death of Justine and her inability to prevent it?
6. As she is developing her plan to help Victor, Elizabeth says that "in helping to destroy the monster, I would no longer be able to feign innocence, and [Victor] could no longer deny the truth. Once it was dead, Victor would have nothing further to hide from me. . . . We would only have each other. . . . I yearned for the freedom I anticipated. . . . Freedom from the fear of having nothing" (p. 213). Is this the reason Elizabeth wants so badly to aid in the destruction the monster? Does Elizabeth truly desire the truth? Once the truth is shared between Elizabeth and Victor, will this provide her freedom? How is she defining *freedom*? Is this really what *freedom* means?
7. During her stay at the asylum, Elizabeth ponders, "Who was I when I was not performing for someone else?" (p. 239) and continues to share that "It was so hard, sorting through what was left of me when I cut off the parts that existed for others" (p. 247). What is Elizabeth realizing about herself when she is in this forced isolation? Why is it that she feels she does not understand herself, and that is this her fault? What is left of Elizabeth once she removes those pieces of herself that "existed for others"?
8. In reflecting on Victor's development, Elizabeth notes that "He had never been able to feel things as deeply as he should; he had been raised in a home where everything was pretense and no one spoke the truth" (p. 250). Based on Elizabeth's belief, what is the effect on Victor of his parents' lack of nurturing, especially as he gets older? Is the inability to feel deeply the reason for Victor's quest for perfection? How does the lack of truth affect the people in the Frankenstein household?

## GENDER

1. When Victor returns, he tells Elizabeth, “You are mine. You have been since the first day we met. You will be mine forever,” leading her to reflect that she “was still safe, then” (p. 113). How does Victor’s statement lead her to this conclusion? Does Victor’s response ensure her safety? How does Elizabeth define safety in this circumstance, and should this be her primary concern? What does Victor imply here about the way he sees Elizabeth, and the way she sees herself? What is revealed about their relationship? Do they see each other in the same way?
2. As they discuss Henry’s proposal, Victor notes that “Men will ever strive for that which is out of reach. For that which is higher than themselves. For that which is divine” (p. 114). How does this statement apply to Henry’s proposal? How might this statement apply to Victor? What is Victor revealing about his understanding of gender dynamics?
3. Once she is placed in the asylum, Elizabeth divulges that “[The institution] had stripped [the women] of everything we were taught made us women, and then told us we were mad.” What had they been “taught made [them] women”? What does this tell us about how women are viewed in this society? What is their purpose? Why does taking away the “collars up to our chins, long skirts, and corsets” (p. 237) have such an effect on their self-images? After explaining that she was committed for trying to leave her abusive husband, one woman on the floor says, “Ask the other women what they are in for and you will find more of the same” (p. 239). What does this tell us about the purpose of the asylum? Why would Victor put Elizabeth there?

## MOTIVATION

1. After Elizabeth wakes from illness, Victor tells her that he “*had to save her.*” When she says she is “*better,*” he responds, “*But you will not always be. Someday death will claim you. And I will not allow it. . . . You are mine, Elizabeth Lavenza, and nothing will take you from me. Not even death*” (p. 92). What is the motivation behind Victor’s experiments? Why does he feel the need to ensure that Elizabeth is never taken from him?
2. When considering Henry’s proposal, Elizabeth notes that if she said yes, “Victor would return, afraid of losing me, or give Henry his blessing. Either way, I would be saved from the constant threat of destitution” (p. 106). What does this reveal about Elizabeth’s character? What is she motivated by? What might be the effects of her saying yes to Henry? Would saying yes to Henry “save” Elizabeth?
3. After Elizabeth discovers Victor with the monster, she reflects that “All our lives, I had never pushed him to give me a full story. I had let him maintain his dignity, let him dwell in the gift of my grace. But I could not do that this time. Not after what I had seen. In order to protect him, I had to know the truth of all things” (p. 181). Is Elizabeth’s previous failure to confront Victor indeed a gift of grace or a form of ignorance? Why do you think Elizabeth never pushed Victor to provide her with the “full story”? Why does she feel as though the truth is necessary now? How might Elizabeth’s quest to discover the truth affect their relationship? How might this affect her ability to find safety?

## RESPONSIBILITY AND PROTECTION

1. After visiting the charnel house, Elizabeth realizes, "Victor had left, possessed by the need to defeat death, and without me here to temper his obsessions, he had descended to hellish depths. I had driven Victor to this madness. I would repair it in any way necessary" (p. 90). Has she driven Victor to "this madness"? Why does Elizabeth feel as though she must always save and protect Victor? Why does she feel she must be the one to fix the problems he creates or encounters?
2. In the flashback when Madame Frankenstein is on her death bed, she tells Elizabeth that she "can never leave. . . . You have to stay here, with Victor. . . . Victor . . . is . . . your . . . responsibility" (pp. 91–92). Why does Victor's mother insist that Elizabeth is responsible for Victor? Is he really her responsibility? Should this responsibility also fall on Judge Frankenstein? What about Victor himself?
3. Mary is the first to wonder why Elizabeth searches for Victor and tries so hard to protect him. When she questions whether Elizabeth loves him, Elizabeth responds that "He is my entire life. . . . And my only hope of a future" (p. 99). Do you agree with Elizabeth's statement? What might happen to her future if she does not continue to protect him? Is she doing this out of love?
4. As Elizabeth searches again for Victor and the monster, she notes that Victor "thought he was protecting me, but he was the one in need of protection" (p. 187). Do you agree with her statement? Why does Elizabeth feel Victor needs her protection? Why does she feel that she doesn't need protection?
5. When Elizabeth realizes what Victor has done on the island for the monster, she decides to take action, saying, "I did not care if it threatened my life, or even if it killed me. Victor would disagree, but my safety was not worth this steepest of costs" (p. 201). What is the cost that Elizabeth is referring to? She has always prioritized her safety; why is taking action now more important to her than safety?
6. Elizabeth excuses Victor's crimes, noting they were "pride and ambition, stepping beyond the boundaries God set for the world." She then claims that the monster "was punishing him enough" for these crimes. Do you agree with her assessment? She poses the question "How did one punish those [crimes]?" (p. 207). What do you think would be an appropriate punishment?
7. As Elizabeth confronts Victor, he claims, "You made it clear from the start you did not care what I did so long as you did not have to know the specifics. It was our agreement" (p. 229). Did Elizabeth agree to this, and if so, when? Do you agree with Victor's statement, given prior events and Elizabeth's role in them?
8. Near the end of the text, Mary shares with Elizabeth that "Not being blameless is not the same as being guilty" (p. 267). What does this statement mean? How does it pertain to Elizabeth? To Victor?



## WRITER'S CRAFT

1. Each chapter of the text begins with an epigraph that sets the thematic tone for that section of the book. Each of these epigraphs is actually an allusion to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Choose one of these epigraphs. What is the connection between Elizabeth's story and the epigraph that the author has chosen to begin the chapter? What themes does the epigraph help to establish? What tone does it set?
2. When Elizabeth is describing a tree being hit by lightning to Justine, she notes that "To me, [this experience] was the great and terrible power of nature. It was like seeing God" (p. 4). What does this reveal about Elizabeth's view of God's power? How is the power of God linked to nature, and why might this experience be one she calls "glorious," when Justine sees it as "terrifying" (p. 4)?
3. Upon returning to the Frankenstein estate after her experience in Ingolstadt, Elizabeth realizes it "was all boastful artifice hiding the truth: The house was dying" (p. 129). What does she mean when she says this? How might the house be a metaphor for the Frankenstein family? What has changed about the way Elizabeth sees this home and the people in it from the beginning of the story to now?
4. When Elizabeth arrives at the island off the coast of Scotland, she describes feeling "exposed and unprotected." She believes this could explain the "military aggression of this tiny island country: they could never feel the edges of their land, so they pushed forever outward" (p. 188). How might this island represent Elizabeth in this moment? How might it also represent Victor, who has escaped to this island? How might it represent the monster?
5. Compare the first epigraph from Part One, "How Can I Live Without Thee?" (p. 1), with the first one for Part Three, "Long is the way, and hard, that out of hell leads up to light" (p. 183). What has shifted in Elizabeth's perspective since the beginning of the text? How does this compare to the progression of the original Frankenstein story?
6. What is the effect of shifting the telling of this story from Victor Frankenstein's perspective to Elizabeth Lavenza's? What is gained? What is lost?
7. In Kiersten White's Author's Note, she shares that "it isn't the answers in stories that are interesting—it is the questions" (p. 289). What questions are readers left with at the conclusion of *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein*?

Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Speaking Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration S.L. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1-3

## EXTENDED WRITING PROMPTS

Follow-up questions to consider, posed by Kiersten White's Author's Note:

- ♦ How much of who we are is shaped by those around us?
- ♦ What happens when our identity depends on someone else?
- ♦ Where are the girls and the women in classic literature? Why might a retelling like this, where the perspective is shifted to the female's voice, be important to study alongside the original story?

## BIG ESSAY

What is the danger of a single story?

## EXTENDED THINKING

1. Two hundred years later, the story of Frankenstein still resonates in modern culture. In fact, *Science* magazine's "The Horror Story That Haunts Science" notes that "Scientific literature, like the popular press, is rife with references to Frankenfood, Frankencells, Frankenlaws, Frankenswine, and Frankendrugs—most of them supposedly monstrous creations" (Cohen). What is it about Frankenstein that keeps it relevant?
2. The original story of Frankenstein has the subtitle "Or, the Modern Prometheus," which lends itself to "the idea that mad scientists playing God the creator will cause the entire human species to suffer eternal punishment for their trespasses and hubris" (Cohen). Given the experience of Elizabeth Lavenza in *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein*, is the same subtitle applicable to this story?
3. *Frankenstein* is "a story of scientific hubris, a creator consumed by his creation, a male scientist trying to eliminate women's role in reproduction" (Kupferschmidt, "The Long Shadow of Frankenstein"). What is the purpose, then, of retelling the story? How does it connect to and contrast with the original?
4. Some argue that the real moral of the original *Frankenstein* is "not the danger of scientists violating the natural order, but the dire fate that awaits creators who fail to care for their creations" (Cohen). Is this the moral of *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* as well? Explain your reasoning.
5. There are many scientists "studying which technological advances pose 'existential risks' that could wipe out humanity or at least end civilization as we know it—and what can be done to stop them" (Kupferschmidt, "Taming the Monsters of Tomorrow"). Research "existential risks" and how scientists are trying to combat them. Present your findings; then make connections to the experiences of Elizabeth and Mary as individuals who are also combating "existential risks."
6. In *Science* magazine's "The Next Generation's Frankenstein Films," "What modern research could serve as the basis for the next [*Frankenstein*-inspired science fiction] box-office hit?"

Some topics to think about:

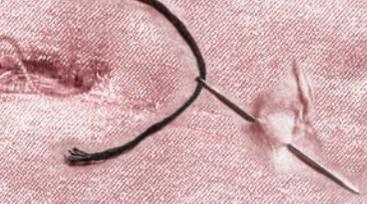
- Gene-editing technology
- Xenotransplantation
- Artificial intelligence
- Microbes and viruses

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Correlates to Common Core Standard Speaking and Listening: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4, Writing: Text Types and Purposes CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2, Writing: Research to Build and Present Knowledge CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.8, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9

This guide was prepared by Kimberly Herzog, English teacher at Staples High School in Westport, CT.



# PRAISE

★ "Skillful worldbuilding and foreshadowing steadily build suspense to a **BREATHTAKING** climax"

—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred

"White neatly undercuts the original by making Victor's narrative wildly unreliable. . . . **THIS CHARACTER-DRIVEN NOVEL** with a healthy amount of gore should appeal to horror fans."

—*Booklist*

"White adds **EMOTIONAL DEPTH TO A CHARACTER** who was passive in Shelley's original. She highlights, with **FEMINIST SENSITIVITY**, Elizabeth's total dependence as a woman of her time, playing whatever part is necessary to ensure her future."

—*School Library Journal*

"An exciting tale. . . . **AN ALL-AROUND WIN** for readers who enjoy (not too scary) horror, thrilling tales, and contemplating the deeper meaning of life."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"**EXQUISITELY DISTURBING.** *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* is **A BEAUTIFUL TAPESTRY OF HORROR**, sewn together with threads of madness, obsession, and murder. Kiersten White has written **A MASTERFUL AND MONSTROUS RETELLING.**"

—**STEPHANIE GARBER**, *New York Times* and internationally bestselling author of *Caraval* and *Legendary*

"**VISCERAL, SINISTER, AND INESCAPABLY COMPELLING,** *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* feels at once reverent of its inspiration, and entirely new. White's skill is **SCALPEL-SHARP.**"

—**V. E. SCHWAB**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

