AQA English Literature GCSE

Frankenstein: Character Profile

Henry Clerval

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Henry Clerval

Character Summary

Shelley constructs Henry Clerval to emphasise the theme of **isolation** in the novel. His loyalty means he acts as Victor's **foil**, highlighting how Victor abandons his community in favour of ambition. Likewise, Henry is full of enthusiasm, whilst Victor is overcome with depression. He arguably **symbolises** human connection and stability. In spite of Victor's mental suffering, Henry remains by his side. Shelley draws a **parallel** between Henry and Elizabeth: both are a **symbol** of virtue and both of their deaths **symbolise** the loss of **morality** and compassion.



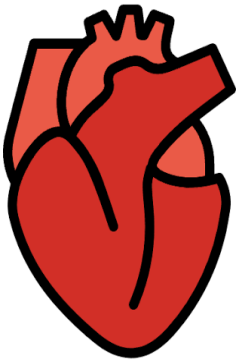
Henry acts as Victor's **moral guidance** to guide him towards a more ethical way of thinking, but he is ultimately unsuccessful, **symbolising** how evil triumphs over good. Through Henry's character, Shelley warns of the danger of isolation and ambition, and the need for human connection.

Whilst Henry is able to appreciate the beauty of nature, Victor seeks dominance over it. Overall, Henry's empathy and **idealistic** view of life renders his death a **tragedy** and elucidates the dangers of Victor's selfish ambition.

Key Themes

Human Connection

Shelley depicts Henry as the emotional counterpoint to Victor, with Victor explaining that ***"Clerval called forth the better feelings of my heart".*** Whilst Victor has **withdrawn from society** in order to create the monster, Henry serves as a grounding force for Victor. Despite Victor's intense interest in science, Henry is able to distract Victor with ***"better feelings"***, delineating how Shelley values **human connection** over intellectual endeavours. It is interesting that in chapter 6, Victor is aware that relationships are more important than science.



The Power of Nature

Shelley describes Henry using natural and **Romantic imagery**. When Henry nurses Victor, the weather is described as a ***"divine spring"***, symbolising how Henry nursing Victor back to life is symbolic of a rebirth for Victor. Likewise, ***"divine"*** may indicate Henry's spiritual influence in contrast to Victor's scientific experiments.

The **Romantic movement** celebrated nature and emotions over science. Henry acts as Victor's **foil**: whilst Victor isolates himself from the natural world, Shelley describes Henry and the natural world as being at one with each other. Shelley argues how the natural world can be healing, whilst **scientific pursuit** and ambition result in ill-health for Victor.



Context

Romanticism

The **Romantic movement** is named after the **romance genre** which originated in the Middle Ages, often involving a quest with some elements of folklore. The Romantic movement could be seen as a **revival** of this previous romance genre, following its decline in popularity. Often Romanticism is considered the **rejection of typical conventions** found in literature, and values emotions, nature and individual experience.

Henry **embodies** the Romantic ideal in his appreciation of the natural world. Equally, Victor's quest for knowledge mirrors the Middle Age tradition of a knight pursuing something impossible. However, Shelley **subverts** the romance genre in Victor's failure to achieve glory: he is met with his own destruction and the loss of his closest relationships including his close friend, Henry.

Georgian Gothic



The **Gothic genre** began with the setting of castles, damsels in distress, the supernatural, with the 1764 *The Castle of Otranto* arguably being the first Gothic novel. Shelley's novel was first published in 1818 during the Georgian era. The early Gothic was a response to the Enlightenment period, which emphasised the dominance of **reason and science**. By contrast, Shelley's novel appears to warn of the dangers of science and too much focus on the individual.

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Key Quotations

"Perfectly humane, so thoughtful in his generosity, so full of kindness and tenderness amidst his passion"

- The **superlative** ***"perfectly"*** emphasises the extent of Henry's good nature, demonstrating how he is the most perfect example of virtue. Likewise, the **repetition** of ***"so"*** before listing the **abstract nouns** further reinforces how virtuous Henry's character is. It could be argued that Shelley exaggerates the goodness of Henry's nature to illuminate Victor's selfishness.

"Alas, how great was the contrast between us!"

- ***"Alas"*** implies a sense of Victor's disappointment, likely towards himself. Despite both Henry and Victor being close friends interested in science, Henry's nature proves to be far kinder than Victor's.

- Despite Victor recognising that Henry has a more **moral character**, the reader later learns that Henry will die whilst Victor survives. Shelley may be subtly **critiquing** contemporary society for rewarding men who selfishly further their own desires and neglect humanity. However, Victor's later mental **turmoil** indicates how Victor may survive, but he is not happy, and suffers as a consequence of his isolation.

"Their melancholy is soothing, and their joy elevating...When you read their writings, life appears to consist in a warm sun and a garden of roses,—in the smiles and frowns of a fair enemy, and the fire that consumes your own heart. How different from the manly and heroical poetry of Greece and Rome!"

- Victor describes Eastern poems which Henry is interested in through a highly **romanticised** lens in contrast to the ***"manly"*** poetry of the West. The reference to a "***garden of roses***" indicates how Henry is curious about the beauty of the natural world. This **contrasts** with Victor's desire to be the hero, a figure who is admired by others. Whilst Henry desires **human connection**, Victor yearns for adulation.

