AQA English Literature GCSE

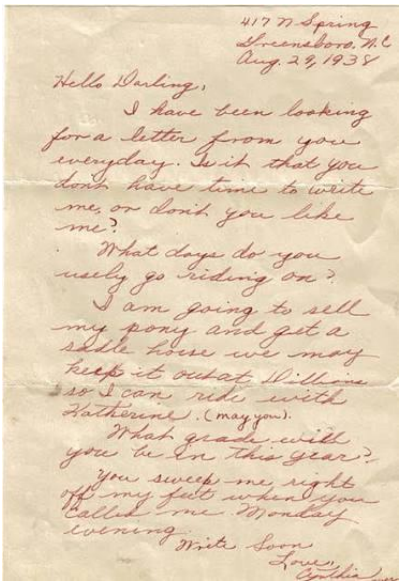
Frankenstein: Character Profile

Robert Walton

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Robert Walton

Character Summary


417 N. Spring
Greensboro, N.C
Aug. 23, 1934

Hello Darling,
I have been looking for a letter from you everyday. Is it that you don't have time to write me, or don't you like me?
What days do you usely go riding on?
I am going to sell my pony and get a saddle horse we may keep it out at Williams so I can ride with Katherine. (may you).
What grade will you be in this year?
You sweep me right off my feet when you called me Monday evening. Write Soon
Love,

Shelley begins the novel with Robert Walton's letters. Walton forms the **epistolary** (letter) form of the novel and he is the **frame narrator** (the first person who introduces the story). Despite modern readers' expectations of the **Gothic horror** of *Frankenstein*, Shelley begins her novel in a simple manner, allowing her to set the reader up for the horror and themes of isolation and ambition which are to come later in the novel.

Since Walton is writing to his sister, who he shares a close relationship with, he is likely a **reliable narrator**. Through writing to her, Shelley taps into the theme of **familial love** and demonstrates Walton's **isolation**. However, Shelley's employment of three different perspectives encourages the reader to question the **validity** of each narrative and whether they contradict each other. Arguably, Walton's admiration of Victor distorts the reliability of the narrative.



Key Themes

Isolation

In Walton's second letter, he confesses, ***"I desire the company of a man."*** This arguably **foreshadows** Victor's own loneliness and creates a **parallel** between the two characters, with Walton acting as Victor's **doppelgänger** or Gothic double.

However, while Walton finds companionship in Victor and is able to learn from his mistakes, Victor seeks control over his creation rather than companionship. Shelley therefore presents isolation as dangerous, suggesting that meaningful relationships depend on mutual support rather than dominance.

Ambition and the Pursuit of Knowledge

ike Victor, Walton is highly **ambitious** and determined to reach the North Pole. His desire to discover the ***"secret of the magnet"*** creates a clear **parallel** with Victor's attempt to uncover the ***"secret of life."*** Both men are driven by the pursuit of forbidden or unexplored knowledge.

However, Walton's journey becomes dangerous when his ship is trapped in the ice and he encounters Victor, isolated and close to death. Victor's story then acts as a warning about the dangers of **unchecked ambition**.

Fear of the Unknown

Shelley's Arctic **setting** draws on Gothic fears of the unknown and the **sublime** power of nature – the idea that human beings are small and insignificant beside the vast natural world. The setting therefore reinforces the theme of **ambition** by emphasising how powerless Walton is compared with his surroundings.



This challenges Walton's desire to prefer ***"glory to every enticement"*** and suggests that human ambition can appear insignificant when confronted by nature. The vast landscape also intensifies his isolation, presenting him as a single individual surrounded by an immense and hostile environment.

Context

Gothic Novel

Shelley first started writing the novel alongside Byron and John Polidori with the intention of writing a **horror** story. Shelley was writing in Switzerland when a volcanic explosion had brought widespread rain across the globe. The bad weather is reflected in the **sublime** (power of nature) landscape of the novel.

Travel Narrative

Like Walton, Mary Shelley travelled around Europe and was highly cultured. The first landscape introduced to us in the novel is the seascape of the Arctic, likely inspired by Shelley's visit to the Swiss glaciers.

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Shelley's Parents



Mary Shelley's parents were Mary Wollstonecraft, who is often considered a **protofeminist**, and William Godwin, a philosopher. Both were considered **radical**, thus would have been viewed as **political outsiders**, explaining the recurrence of the theme of isolation in Mary Shelley's novel.

Key Quotations

"You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings" (Letter 1)

- In the **exposition** of Shelley's novel, she begins with Walton's letter to his sister. Immediately the reader does not know who the addressee ***"Mrs Saville"*** is, nor who the speaker is. This builds **suspense** as the reader wonders who is speaking.

- The **direct address** of ***"you"*** makes the reader feel as if they are being spoken to, further piquing our interest.

- Shelley's reference to ***"evil forebodings"*** **ironically alludes** to Walton and Victor's own misfortune and suffering later in the novel. Through beginning with a **positive and idealised tone,** Shelley ensures that each character's suffering appears more intense by contrast.



"How slowly the time passes here...certainly possessed of dauntless courage" (Letter 2)

- Walton's attitude here **juxtaposes** his hopeful tone at the start of his first letter. His complaint of time passing ***"slowly"*** emphasises his boredom in contrast to his ***"rejoice"*** in the previous letter.

- Shelley employs **hubris**. Despite Walton expressing his love of his "***dauntless courage"***, it is this courage which results in both Walton and Victor's demise. The **verb** "possessed" creates a subtle indication of the deleterious impact of too much ambition. Instead of propelling Walton to action, his ***"courage"*** leads him blindly into destruction.

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"My dear Sister" "My dear Margaret" "Your affectionate brother" (Letters 1-4)

- Walton's third and fourth letter omit the sign-off ***"your affectionate brother, Robert Walton"***, instead Walton shifts to signing off ***"R.W"*** in his third letter, and ends his final letter with no mention of his name at all. Walton's shift to a more abrupt sign-off may **symbolise** the decay of their relationship.

- However, whilst the sign-off becomes more abrupt, his address shifts from just ***"to Mrs Saville",*** to instead naming her his ***"sister"*** in his third letter, before naming her ***"Margaret"*** in his final letter. This may reflect how Walton's affection for his sister grows, whilst his own self-confidence decreases. He does not feel the need to mention his own name, but makes his address to Margaret more personal.