AQA English Literature GCSE

Frankenstein: Character Profile

Victor Frankenstein

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Victor Frankenstein

Character Summary

Frankenstein is the **protagonist** of Mary Shelley's **Gothic** novel. He is a young scientist who is intrigued by the concept of **galvanism** (bringing something to life using electricity). However, his creation is labelled a ***"monster"***, and Frankenstein abandons it.

Through constructing Frankenstein, Shelley warns against **unchecked ambition** and **individualism**. He represents the **archetypal Romantic** figure of isolation. Frankenstein's desire for knowledge isolates him from his family, and ultimately results in him being miserable and alone, even rejecting his own creation.

Key Themes



Selfish Ambition

Shelley first describes Frankenstein as being ***"smitten with the thirst for knowledge".*** Shelley's use of the **idiom** of ***"thirst for knowledge"*** indicates how Frankenstein is self-serving, pursuing knowledge to satiate his own ***"thirst"***. Despite doctors naturally being a caring profession, Frankenstein appears to favour his needs over those of others, conforming to **Romantic** ideas of **individuality**. Equally, ***"smitten"*** reflects the extent to which Frankenstein is driven by his emotions. Although we typically view doctors as rational people, ***"smitten"*** emphasises how he acts **impulsively and not ethically**. Shelley warns that **unchecked ambition** without ethics only results in Victor's demise.

Science and Religion

Victor does not reference religion until near the end of the novel, describing a ***"horrible pilgrimage".*** A pilgrimage is a journey of spiritual importance, implying that Victor has undergone a form of **spiritual transformation**, albeit a ***"horrible"*** one. ***"Horrible"*** may indicate that Victor's journey is one of desperate struggle, not spiritual fulfilment: he learns precisely what he does not want from life.

It could be argued the suffering elicited by his scientific discoveries encouraged him to re-evaluate his perspective on religion. Shelley taps into **contemporary attitudes regarding the war between science and religion**, possibly suggesting that science only breeds conflict. Shelley elucidates how science is a source of power, but not fulfilment. Without religious grounding, Victor is left feeling hollow.

Supernatural



Frankenstein is haunted by ***"the spirits of the dead"*** **juxtaposing** the references to science earlier in the novel. By presenting a **supernatural outlook**, Shelley delineates how significantly Frankenstein's perspective has been altered. It is unclear whether Shelley is portraying Frankenstein as a 'madman' or merely having a different view on science.

Ultimately, Shelley warns that Victor cannot escape the **ramifications** of playing God, and this takes the form of a **psychological breakdown**. Shelley underscores how Victor's suffering is not temporary, but continues to haunt him, **symbolising** the long-term damage caused by scientific experiments.

Context

Gothic Horror and Romanticism



Shelley first started writing *Frankenstein* on holiday, intending to write a **Gothic horror** story. The Gothic genre was often used as a means of writing about **contemporary fears** in a more subtle manner. Gothic literature often drew on themes of death, the supernatural and science, tapping into contemporary readers' fears of the unknown.

Shelley was writing during the **Romantic** movement, an art movement which focused on emotions, nature and the individual. Whilst Victor adheres to Romantic ideas of individualism, he rejects the natural world in favour of science.

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Scientific Developments

Shelley was interested in the work of the 18th century physician Luigi Galvani. He managed to stimulate muscle contraction in a frog through the use of an electric current, a process named **galvanism**. Most **Georgian** readers would have been familiar with Galvani's work, and would have likely been worried about the possibility of dangerous or uncontrollable experiments. In *Frankenstein*, Frankenstein's creation of the monster arguably **mirrors** the way Galvani brought creatures to life.



Equally, the Georgian period was a time of great **curiosity** without **ethical considerations**. Doctors would dig up bodies in order to learn more about the human anatomy. Through portraying Frankenstein's monster as a destructive force, Shelley encourages readers to consider the **ethical implications** of scientific developments.

Key Quotations

"Cheek had grown pale with study...emaciated with confinement"

- Shelley outlines how Frankenstein's pursuit of knowledge leaves him physically and emotionally drained. The **emotive language** of ***"pale"*** and ***"emaciated"*** may encourage the reader to sympathise with Frankenstein. Although initially full of pride, seeing his physical decline portrays him as a more pitiful figure rather than an arrogant one.

- His physical deterioration creates a sense of **foreboding** as the reader fears the climax. The **Romantic movement** criticised rationalism such as ***"study"***, instead celebrating emotions and the power of nature. Frankenstein's rejection of nature reflects contemporary anxieties about the endless pursuit of knowledge.

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"Irresistible hold of my imagination"

- ***"Hold"*** indicates how Frankenstein is no longer in control of his own mind, as if he is imprisoned by his own ambition. Shelley warns of the dangers of scientific developments without ethical considerations. Shelley **foreshadows** Frankenstein's irrationality, creating a fear in the reader of something foreboding.

- The reader likely feels disconcerted by Victor's lack of control in contrast to his self-assurance in the **exposition**. The allusion to the **supernatural** force taking a hold of his imagination conforms to the **Gothic genre**.

"I shunned my fellow creatures as I had been guilty of a crime"

- In the **climax**, the creature comes to life. Shelley constructs the doctor as someone in direct **contrast** to typical ideas of a rational doctor. Likewise, doctors cannot ***"shun"*** their patients. Shelley encourages readers to consider how Frankenstein has crossed moral boundaries, thus his act should be deemed criminal.

- Shelley's use of the **simile** where she compares scientific experiments to a ***"crime"*** reflects how creation carries ethical responsibilities, and scientific developments can have destructive consequences.

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