AQA English Literature GCSE

Frankenstein

Context

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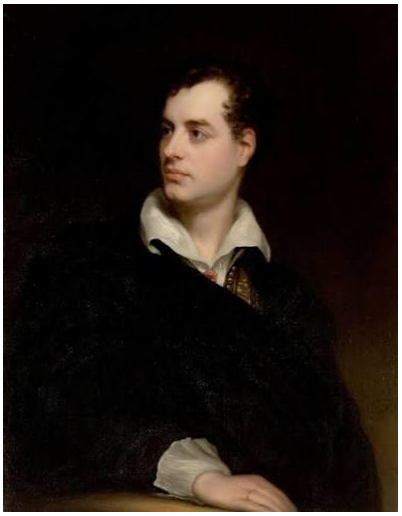
Romanticism

Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* during the **Romantic** movement, an artistic and intellectual movement which began in the late 1700s. It was a response to the **Enlightenment** period, which focused on **reason and scientific developments**. By contrast, the Romantic movement emphasised **emotions, individuality and nature** over rationality.

Romanticism in *Frankenstein*

- **Victor** – favours science over relationships, signalling a rejection of Romantic values. However, the Romantics also valued individual **imagination**, which is reflected in Victor's scientific experiments and time spent alone.
- **The Monster** – his appreciation of the **natural world** and **emotional sensitivity** are in alignment with Romantic values.
- **Walton** – is arguably the **archetypal Romantic hero**, **symbolising** discovery, exploration and glory. Nevertheless, through Walton, Shelley warns of unchecked ambition.

The Byronic Hero



The concept of the **Byronic hero** is named after Lord Byron, who was close friends with Mary Shelley. Byronic heroes are often isolated, melancholic, charismatic, morally ambiguous, rebellious and mysterious. They often possess a dangerous flaw e.g. excessive ambition.

Victor can be seen as a Byronic hero because his scientific ambitions result in him becoming increasingly **alienated from society**. Equally, his excessive pride means that he believes he can create life, ultimately leading to his downfall.

The Romantic Hero

The **Romantic hero** is similar to the Byronic hero, but is kind-hearted rather than morally ambiguous. Both are **outsiders**, but the Romantic hero seeks solitude as a means of self-discovery or exploration.

Walton is arguably the Romantic hero in the novel. He is fascinated by discovery and ***"daydreams"*** of exploring the Arctic and has immense admiration for the natural world. Whilst Victor becomes consumed by ambition, Walton abandons his expedition in order to save members of the crew.

Science

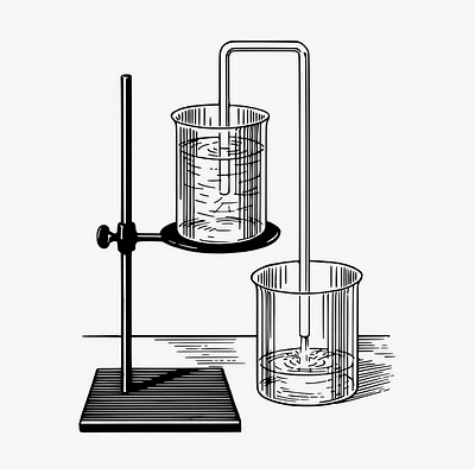


Scientific Advancements

The 1800s was a time of **rapid scientific advancements**. Developments in chemistry as a separate branch of science, as well as electricity and medicine, aided contemporary understanding about how life was created.

When Luigi Galvani touched a frog's legs with electricity, it resulted in the frog's legs moving, a concept later termed **galvanism**. As a consequence, people speculated whether life could be created without God's influence.

Shelley's Message



Whilst Victor's obsession with science leads to his death, Shelley does not necessarily condemn science. Rather, she encourages readers to evaluate the **ethical ramifications** before conducting scientific experiments. Victor's demise arises because of his refusal to take accountability for his actions.

The Enlightenment Period



Shelley wrote her novel just after the **Enlightenment** period. The Enlightenment was an intellectual and philosophical movement which placed an emphasis on **rationality and science** as opposed to tradition and religion.

Victor is arguably **symbolic of the Enlightenment ideals** because of his desire for knowledge and his interest in science. However, Shelley also unveils the limitations of Enlightenment attitudes, warning of the dangers of scientific development without compassion.

Alchemy

Shelley describes Victor studying famous alchemists such as Agrippa, Paracelsus and Magnus. **Alchemy** is an ancient practice which is considered a combination of chemistry and magic. Its principal aim was to find the ***"philosopher's stone and the elixir of life"***. The alchemists believed the philosopher's stone could grant eternal youth, life and health. It is particularly **ironic** given that Victor's creation of the monster results in the death of those closest to him.

Gender Roles



Patriarchal society

Shelley was writing during the Georgian era where a woman's role was often limited to the **domestic sphere**, with very restricted educational opportunities. A **patriarchal society** is a society where positions of power are occupied predominantly by men.

Female Characters in *Frankenstein*

Shelley constructs female characters who embody the qualities associated with the ideal Georgian woman, including benevolence, domesticity and self-sacrifice e.g. Elizabeth, Caroline, Justine and Agatha. It could be argued that Shelley constructs the **ideal Georgian woman** in order to poke fun at **contemporary patriarchal attitudes**.

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Shelley's Mother



Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, **advocated for women's rights** and published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* where she argued that women should have equal access to education as men.

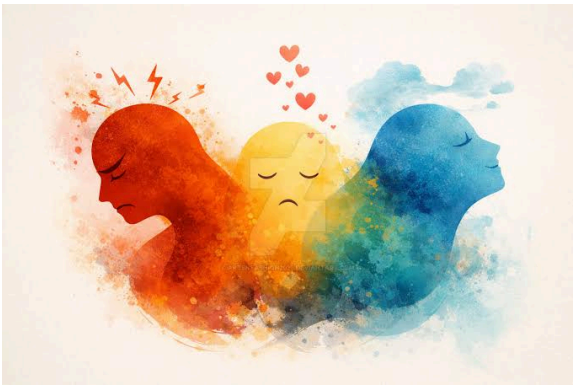
Whilst Shelley's female characters such as Justine, Elizabeth and Caroline are all nurturers, the eloquence of Justine's speech when on trial illuminates how Shelley argues that women can be both educated and **traditionally nurturing**. Through constructing women with primarily domestic roles, Shelley **criticises contemporary society's silencing of women's voices**.

Masculinity

As a consequence of women's limited job prospects, women were often **financially dependent** on their husbands, meaning men were expected to be ambitious and educated. Whilst contemporary society often encouraged ambition, Shelley warns of the dangers of unchecked ambition on Victor's relationships.

Emotional Repression

Whilst Georgian society often valued emotional restraint in men, Shelley also alludes to the **ramifications of suppressing emotions**. Victor almost never expresses his emotions and retreats rather than confiding in others. It could be argued that Victor's emotional repression is a key factor in his **psychological deterioration** and isolation.



Social Class and Political Reform

Georgian society valued manners and politeness and was divided into **distinct social classes**:

- **Upper class** - the landowners, aristocracy and those with inherited wealth.
- **Middle class** - merchants, academics, businessmen.
- **Working class** - manual labourers, factory workers and servants.

Whilst **social mobility** was improving gradually, opportunities remained limited. Class was often dictated at birth, according to inherited wealth and land ownership. By contrast, Shelley criticises society for assuming that physical appearance and status are accurate indicators of moral character.

Class in *Frankenstein*



- **Victor** - represents wealth and privilege. His **affluence** provided him with an excellent education and the freedom to pursue science.
- **Justine** - as a servant, her lower **social status** likely would have counted against her during her trial because Georgian society often conflated social class with virtue. Through Justine, Shelley highlights the **injustice** faced by those of a lower social class.
- **Elizabeth** - her upbringing in the Frankenstein family taught her the **manners and refinement** associated with the upper and middle classes.
- **The Monster** - exists outside of the **social hierarchy**. Despite his intelligence and emotional sensitivity, he is **ostracised** due to his appearance. Through his character, Shelley illuminates the consequences of social rejection.

Whilst **contemporary society** often associated class with virtue, Shelley **subverts** this notion through Victor. Despite his privileged upbringing, he is callous towards the monster and does not stand up for Justine in court.

Shelley's Parents

Shelley's mother was Mary Wollstonecraft, a prominent **advocate of women's rights**. Likewise, her father was William Godwin, a famous philosopher who advocated for political reform and criticised **social inequality**. In Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she argued that women should have equal access to education as men, challenging the notion that women were less intelligent than men. Both of

Shelley's parents believed that **social inequality** was created by society as opposed to being natural or decided by God.

The Gothic

Georgian Gothic Literature

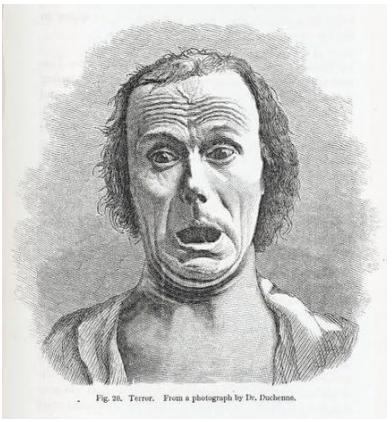


Frankenstein is considered one of the most influential **Gothic novels**, drawing on common Gothic **tropes** such as:

- Isolated settings e.g. the Arctic
- Fear
- Terror
- Horror
- Death e.g. William, Justine, Elizabeth
- Psychological horror e.g. Victor's mental suffering

Horror vs Terror

Shelley initially started writing her novel with the intention of writing a horror story as part of a competition. A key aspect of Gothic horror was tapping into **contemporary fears** about societal change e.g. scientific developments. As Professor John Bowen describes: "the past erupts in the present and deranges it".



There is a key distinction between horror and terror:

- **Terror** - the anticipation and fear of something unknown e.g. Victor's fear when creating the monster. Terror is often associated with the early Gothic.
- **Horror** - the shock of witnessing something disturbing e.g. when Victor first looked at the monster.

The Sublime



Another cornerstone of the Gothic genre was the notion of the **sublime**: landscapes which inspired **awe or terror** especially due to their vast size. In the novel, Walton describes feeling ***"encompassed... by frost and snow"***. Shelley's **personification** of the setting illustrates the extent of its power over Walton, evoking ideas of the sublime power of nature.

The Uncanny

The **uncanny** refers to the feeling of unease elicited by something which is both familiar, but unfamiliar. Victor's creation is both human, yet not fully human, creating a feeling of discomfort in the reader as he **blurs the boundaries** between human and inhuman.

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