AQA English Literature GCSE

Frankenstein

Overview and Key Scenes

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Overview and Key Scenes



Key Characters

Frame Narrators

- **Robert Walton** – an explorer whose letters **frame** the novel. He is both Victor's **foil and parallel**. Whilst Walton appears to learn from his excessive ambition, Victor does not.
- **Margaret Saville** – Walton's sister and the recipient of his letters. Despite never appearing in the novel directly, she **symbolises** family and the importance of human connection.

The Frankenstein Family

- **Victor Frankenstein** – the **protagonist** of the novel whose ambition drives the plot.
- **Elizabeth Lavenza** – Victor's wife. She **symbolises domesticity** and is arguably the **ideal Georgian woman**.
- **Alphonse Frankenstein** – Victor's doting father. He acts as the perfect father, in contrast to the way Victor abandons his creation.
- **William Frankenstein** – Victor's little brother. When the monster murders him, this **symbolises the loss of innocence**.
- **Ernest Frankenstein** – Victor's only surviving brother. He remains on the **periphery** of the action.
- **Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein** – Victor's mother. She is **emblematic of female self–sacrifice** and dies nursing Elizabeth.

Victor's Companions

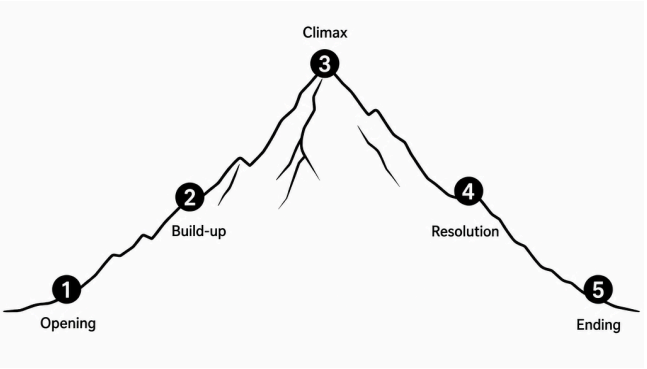
- **Frankenstein's monster** – does not belong to any family. He is the main antagonist, but Shelley also presents him as a **victim of circumstance** and **morally ambiguous**.
- **Henry Clerval** – Victor's closest friend and arguably his **foil**. He is compassionate and appreciative of nature.
- **Justine Moritz** – wrongfully convicted of murder, highlighting the **injustice** of the legal system and a **patriarchal society**.

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De Lacey Family

- **Mr De Lacey** – the **patriarch** of the family. His visual impairment means he judges the monster on his character, not his appearance.
- **Felix De Lacey** – Mr De Lacey's son. When the monster observes him tutoring Safie, Felix indirectly educates the monster.
- **Agatha De Lacey** – Felix's sister. As with Felix, the monster watches her and learns how to integrate into society.
- **Safie** – Felix's fiancee. She **subverts contemporary attitudes** towards women by going against her father's wishes.

Structure



The novel broadly adheres to the conventions of **Freytag's pyramid**, but Shelley's **non–linear narrative** complicates the plot:

- **Exposition** – introduces the main characters, their background and the setting through Walton's letters. The reader also learns about Victor's privileged upbringing and his interest in science.
- **Rising action** – tension starts to build after Victor creates the monster and abandons him.
- **Climax** – The conflict reaches its peak when Victor destroys the female creature. Henry and Elizabeth's deaths add to Victor's mental suffering.
- **Falling action** – The mystery begins to be resolved. Victor and the monster are consumed by revenge and Victor pursues him in the Arctic.
- **Denouement/resolution** – The conflict is entirely resolved. Victor dies and the monster disappears into the Arctic.

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Plot Overview

Scene	Summary	Freytag's Pyramid
Walton's letters	Walton travels to the Arctic and meets Victor.	Exposition
Victor's childhood	We learn about Victor's idyllic upbringing and his interest in science.	Exposition
Victor creates the monster	Victor learns about alchemy and creates his own monster, applying the knowledge he learnt from studying.	Inciting incident
Victor abandons the monster	After Victor abandons the monster, the monster murders William and frames Justine for murder, leading to her execution.	Rising action
The monster's narrative	The De Laceys educate the monster and he asks Victor for a companion.	Rising action
Victor destroys the female creature	Victor fears the female monster will be equally powerful as the male one, so destroys her.	Rising action
Henry is murdered	The monster murders Henry.	Rising action
Elizabeth's death	The monster murders Elizabeth on her wedding night.	Climax
Victor travels to the Arctic	Victor follows the creature into the Arctic.	Falling action
Walton's last letters	Victor dies and the monster is lost.	Resolution

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Key scenes

Scene 1 – Walton rescues Victor

Walton's letters are an integral part of the **frame narrative**, introducing the reader to the theme of ambition and Victor's **hamartia** (fatal flaw which leads to a character's downfall). Shelley draws a **parallel** between Victor and Walton: both are fiercely ambitious.

- ***"I never saw a man in so wretched a condition"*** – Shelley first introduces Victor to the reader as a cautionary figure. Despite his privileged upbringing, we first meet Victor in his worst state. The use of the adverb of frequency ***"never"*** and the **intensifier** ***"so"*** emphasise the extent of Victor's ill–health. Shelley warns of how Victor's ambition has marred both his physical and mental wellbeing.



Scene 2 – Victor creates the monster

Victor applies his reading on science to real life, but is immediately displeased with his creation. Through Victor, Shelley explores themes of **science, ambition and nature versus nurture**.

- ***"It was on a dreary night of November"*** – Shelley constructs a Gothic setting through the adjective ***"dreary"***, creating a **foreboding** atmosphere. Likewise, November is a month associated with darkness and sits on the cusp of winter. The winter season is associated with **decay and darkness**, **foreshadowing** a gloomy future for the monster.

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Scene 3 – William's murder and Justine's trial



Despite the monster's initially innocent nature, he turns malicious when murdering William. Likewise, Victor's silence when Justine is on trial illuminates his **immoral nature** where he is happy for an innocent woman to be executed.

- ***"I bore a hell within me which nothing could extinguish"*** – Shelley's **metaphor** of fire carries **religious connotations**, underscoring Victor's **moral corruption** and delineating how he has 'played God' through creating life.

- ***"The tortures of the accused did not equal mine"*** – despite Justine being sentenced to death for a crime she did not commit, Victor still considers himself to be the ***"victim"***. Shelley constructs Victor as an **unlikeable character**. Even though he had the 'perfect' upbringing, he is selfish. Shelley taps into the **Romanticist**'s belief that children need to undergo a struggle in childhood.

Scene 4 – The monster meets the De Laceys

Despite the monster callously murdering William, this scene offers the reader the chance of **sympathising** with the monster and develops the theme of **nature versus nurture**.

- ***"My heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures"*** – in contrast to the way Victor values rationality over emotion, Shelley's reference to the monster's ***"heart"*** emphasises how he is capable of feeling. Likewise, the monster appears to see the best in the De Laceys, describing them as ***"amiable".*** It is interesting that the creature refers to the De Laceys as ***"creatures"***, drawing a **parallel** between himself and them.

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Scene 5 – The monster asks for a companion

Shelley draws on the theme of **isolation** and the importance of human connection when the monster asks for a female companion.

- ***"You must create a female for me with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being. This you alone can do, and I demand it of you as a right which you must not refuse to concede"*** – Shelley's use of the **imperative** ***"must"*** reflects how the monster begins to assert dominance over Victor.



- Likewise, the poetic nature of the monster's language ***"the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being"*** indicates how the monster has quickly learnt how to speak and assimilate into society. Shelley may be warning of the **dangers of playing God**.

- ***"I am alone and miserable"*** – Shelley's use of **emotive language** encourages the reader to sympathise with the monster. The possibility of a female creature offers hope that the monster may become happy. The monster's isolation mirrors that of Victor's, illuminating Victor's own need for company.

Scene 6 – Victor destroys his female creature

Victor's destruction of the female monster destroys the male monster's last hope of happiness.

- ***"Trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged. The wretch saw me destroy the creature on whose future existence he depended for happiness, and with a howl of devilish despair and revenge, withdrew"*** – Shelley constructs a **violent tone** where Victor ***"tore"*** and ***"destroy[s]"*** the female monster, indicating his lack of respect for his creation and his unsympathetic nature.



- Despite being aware that the monster depended on the female monster for happiness, Shelley employs **animalistic imagery**, comparing the monster to a wolf ***"howl[ing]"***. Whilst Victor **dehumanises** the monster, this language is more applicable to Victor himself for destroying the monster's last chance of happiness.

Scene 7 – Elizabeth is murdered

In the **climax** of the novel, the monster fulfils his promise to murder Elizabeth on her wedding night. Through the monster's act, Shelley warns of the consequences of **excessive ambition**.

- ***"Everywhere I turn I see the same figure—her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murderer on its bridal bier. Could I behold this and live?"*** – this is arguably the first moment in the novel where Victor overtly shows emotion. Again, Shelley draws a **parallel** between Victor and his monster: the monster loses his female companion and then Victor loses his wife. Shelley underscores how Victor is only capable of understanding how the monster feels once he experiences the same loss, elucidating his emotional immaturity.

Scene 8 – Walton's last letters

In the resolution, Shelley ends with a final warning about the **dangers of ambition**.

- ***"He was soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance"*** – Shelley ends the novel with ambiguity, presenting the monster as both a **tragic and mysterious figure**. However, without Victor, she also offers the monster a chance of reinvention and forging a new identity. Equally, the **Gothic imagery** of the monster being ***"lost in darkness"*** reinforces the theme of **isolation**.



Form

Shelley's novel incorporates elements of the **Gothic** genre, the **Romantic** movement, **science fiction** and the **bildungsroman**.

Gothic Fiction



Shelley draws on **Gothic tropes** of **isolated settings, the sublime, supernatural, death, horror and psychological turmoil**. However, instead of the supernatural being a source of evil, Shelley depicts ambition as the greatest source of suffering.

Although the creature is a **Gothic monster**, Shelley also **subverts the trope** by portraying him as compassionate and articulate, encouraging the reader to interrogate the **binary of hero and villain**.

Narrative Structure

Shelley employs multiple narrators to offer different perspectives, allowing the reader to form their own judgements of each character. Since the truth is so elusive, Shelley's use of multiple perspectives adds to the **Gothic mystery**.

- **Walton's letters** – Walton is arguably the **surrogate** for the reader and forms the **frame narrative**. His story **foreshadows** Victor's excessive ambition, acting as a cautionary tale.
- **Victor's first–person narrative** – most of the novel is from Victor's perspective, where he recounts his tale of **ambition and gradual deterioration**.
- **The monster's narrative** – offers a different perspective, challenging Victor's portrayal of the monster as malevolent. Shelley encourages the reader to **sympathise** with the monster, tapping into the **nature versus nurture** debate.

Does Shelley's portrayal of the monster encourage the reader to view him as a victim of Victor's neglect, or should he be held responsible for his behaviour?