AQA English Literature GCSE

Frankenstein: Themes

Ambition

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Ambition

Theme Summary

Shelley arguably wrote *Frankenstein* to warn of the dangers of **unchecked ambition.** Through employing a **frame narrative**, Shelley presents three different portrayals of ambition: Walton's, Frankenstein's and the monster's.

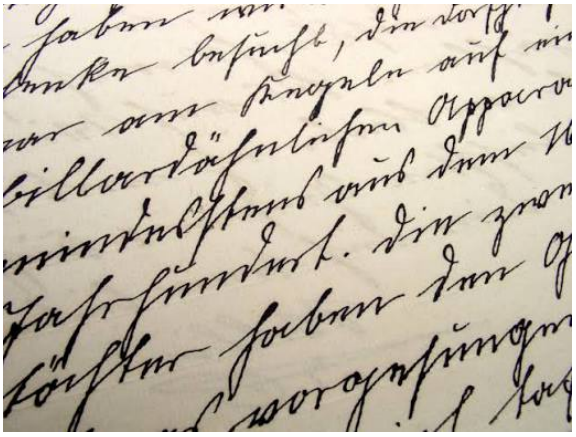


Writing at the time of the **Romanticism** movement which valued individuality, Shelley elucidates how excessive ambition results in moral compromises and ultimately results in Victor and Walton's destruction.

The theme of ambition closely relates to other themes of **isolation** and **science**. Both Victor and Walton isolate themselves from their family in order to meet their goals. Whilst ambition furthers scientific development, Shelley warns against its effect on personal relationships.

Presentation of the Theme

Walton - Naive and Immature Ambition

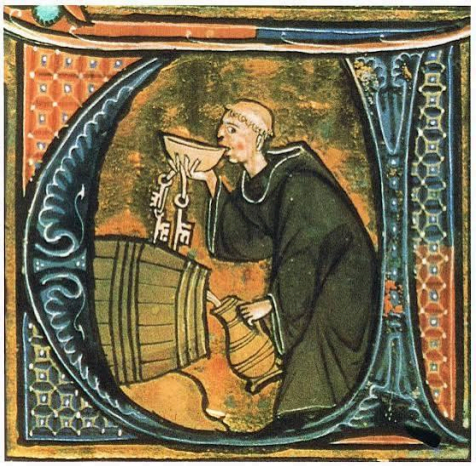


Shelley begins the novel with Walton's **epistolary narrative** (letters) to his sister about his travels. Walton describes feeling ***"the joy a child feels when he embarks on a little boat".*** Shelley's use of the **childlike imagery** encourages the reader to consider Walton an amateur.

Further, Shelley depicts Walton as **egotistical** with a desire to be with ***"Homer and Shakespeare".*** Ironically, the novel's **tragedies** may be reminiscent of Greek or Shakespearian drama, but Walton is not successful on his travels. Shelley may be warning of the dangers of making decisions based on ego.

The Byronic Romantic Hero

Shelley was writing the novel as part of a horror story writing competition initiated by Lord Byron. Byron was the **archetypal Romantic hero** – ambitious, egotistical and self-serving, but also charismatic and charming. The Romantics were known for having an unrealistic **imagination,** with the desire for the unattainable.



Shelley's use of the **extended metaphor** emphasises the destructive impact of Victor's ambition: ***"like a mountain river, from ignoble and almost forgotten sources; but swelling as it proceeded, it became the torrent which, in its course, has swept away all my hopes and joys".*** The image of a ***"torrent"*** refers to a violent and heavy, destructive downpour, **foreshadowing** how Victor's excessive ambition will prove to be his downfall. Likewise, the reference to ***"swelling"*** delineates how Victor's ambition continues to grow to an unnatural degree, consuming his identity.

Victor – Dangerous Scientific Ambition

It could be said that Victor's form of ambition is the most dangerous because he grows to value his scientific pursuits over his personal relationships. Through Victor, Shelley may be criticising the previous **Enlightenment era** for valuing scientific advancement over community.

Shelley constructs Walton to warn Victor of the dangers of too much ambition, describing ambition as ***"madness"*** and the **oxymoron** ***"intoxicating drought".*** Intoxication is a consequence of drinking alcohol, but a drought refers to the absence of water or fluid, possibly suggesting that Walton has been deprived of something essential, and 'bled dry'. Similarly, alcohol impairs the ability to make rational judgements, highlighting how the ego can be akin to alcohol or a drug in its potency.



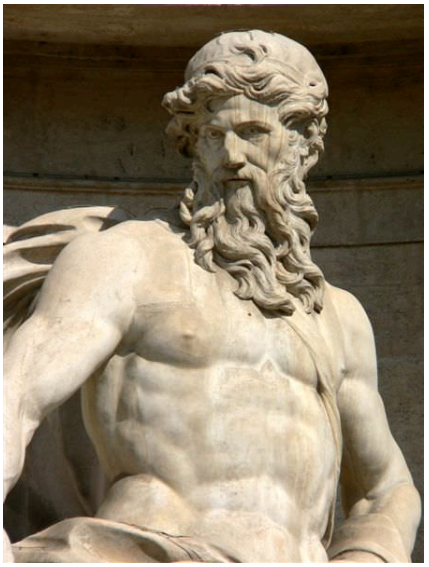
Hubristic Ambition

A key aspect of Victor's ambition is his belief he can rival God through creating life. **Georgian readers** may have viewed Victor's actions as **blasphemous** because he threatens God's role as the sole creator.

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Victor expresses ***"my life might have been passed in ease and luxury; but I preferred glory to every enticement that wealth placed in my path".*** The reference to ***"glory"*** carries **connotations** of heroism emphasising how Victor desires to achieve something beyond human limitations.

The Greek notion of **hubris** is the idea that excessive pride will predict a character's future downfall. Despite Victor's luck of being born into privilege, Shelley employs an arrogant **tone** where Victor still ***"preferred glory"*** to wealth. Victor demonstrates no sense of gratitude to his parents, only disdain towards his lack of freedom.



Overall Message

Whilst Shelley views ambition as a **catalyst** for scientific advancement, she warns against obsessive ambition because it can result in isolation and suffering.