AQA English Literature GCSE

Frankenstein: Themes

Nature vs Nurture

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Nature vs Nurture

Theme Summary



The **nature versus nurture** debate refers to the extent of which people are shaped by their upbringing, education and experiences (nurture) versus their natural personality (nature). Shelley was influenced by Jean–Jaques **Rousseau**'s theory that humans are naturally **innocent**, but can be improved by education or **corrupted** by society.

Shelley explores the theme mainly through Victor and the monster. Whilst Victor has a privileged upbringing, the monster is neglected by Victor and rejected by society. Naturally, the monster is full of ***"love and sympathy"***, but rejection makes him **vengeful and violent**. Similarly, Victor's childhood leaves him unprepared for future difficulties and renders him selfish.

Instead of offering a simple answer, Shelley encourages the reader to consider the **extent** to which humans are shaped by their nature and nurture, suggesting that humans are shaped by a **combination of both.**

Presentation of the Theme

Victor's Upbringing – Parental Duty



In Victor's narration, he describes himself as his parents' ***"plaything and their idol...whose future it was in their hands to direct to happiness or misery".*** Shelley outlines how Victor considers it his parents' duty to raise him to be good.

An ***"idol"*** is something which is worshipped, emphasising the extent to which Victor's parents adored him. Whilst typically the children have a ***"plaything"***, Shelley **infantilises** Victor's parents, portraying them as similar to children who play with toys.

However, ***"in their hands"*** highlights his parents' sense of dominance and control over Victor: like a child moving their toys, Victor's parents appear to have a **controlling influence** over him. This may **foreshadow** Victor's later inability to raise his creature because of his dependence on his parents to order his every move. Shelley may be warning against a style of 'nurture' which consists of being domineering as opposed to allowing children the **autonomy** to make mistakes.

Romanticism – The Importance of Struggle

The **Romantics** greatly valued struggle as an important part of maturing. However, Victor does not experience this struggle in his privileged upbringing. The Romantics argued that comfort led to **intellectual stagnation**.



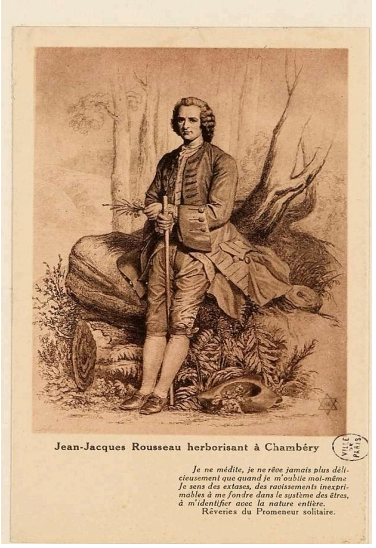
It could be argued that Victor's childhood was too perfect, meaning he does not know how to react when something goes wrong. The monster reflects: ***"I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend".*** The use of the verb ***"made"*** elucidates the role of nurture and environment in shaping people. Although naturally innocent, the monster is ill-equipped to deal with suffering.

Whilst Victor's parents **exerted** too much control over Victor, Victor completely neglects the monster. Shelley outlines how both styles of parenting result in people or 'creatures' who cannot cope with life's challenges.

Shelley draws a **parallel** with the monster and Victor: after the monster has a few negative encounters, he murders Elizabeth and frames Justine for murder. The monster is treated badly, but also quickly grows to view people like Justine in a negative light, before meeting them. Shelley supports the notion of **Romantic struggle in childhood**, suggesting that it helps adults cope with hardship in later life. Whilst critics are often **unsympathetic** towards Victor, Shelley offers the possibility of sympathising with his difficulties in coping with failure.

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The Monster's Poor Reception by Society



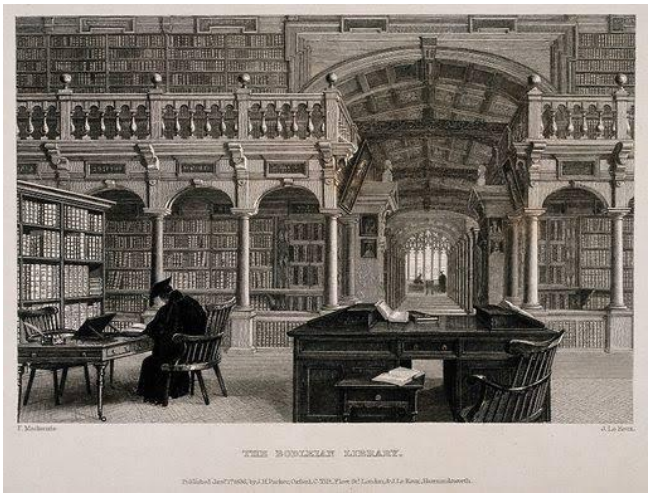
The French philosopher Jean-Jaques **Rousseau** argued that humans are born innocent, but society can be a source of corruption. Shelley explores the **corruptive nature of society** through the way the monster is received by society. It is not until after the monster's ***"dearly bought experience, [he] dared not enter".***

Likewise, Shelley underscores how the monster's nature is naturally good: ***"my heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy".*** Although Shelley demonstrates how the monster's negative experiences render him bitter, he also insists that ***"make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous".*** In the same manner that Rousseau views society as a corruptive force, Shelley argues that positive treatment can make people benevolent again.

Education and Moral Corruption

Shelley also constructs Victor to embody the **Romantic idea of struggle** and striving for the best when describing how Victor ***"as a child, I had not been content with the results promised".*** Further, the phrase ***"as a child"*** alludes to Rousseau's theory on the importance of education. Rousseau argued in favour of education, viewing it as a civilising force which prevented children from becoming **morally corrupt**.

John Locke's Theory of Education



Shelley was writing at a time where education was highly valued because people were seen as a blank slate (**tabula rasa**), with no innate knowledge. Character was often believed to be shaped through education and upbringing, rather than the natural environment. Locke argued for a more **democratic** form of education: if everyone is educated in the same manner, everyone will have the same opportunities.

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Walton is educated through ***"good Uncle Thomas' library"***, seeking **self-education**. Rather than choosing formal education, Walton develops his mind through independent study. Likewise, Victor chooses to read the alchemists. Both Walton and Victor are disappointed when their theoretical knowledge does not apply to practical life. It could be argued that Shelley **warns** against the perils of **self-education** because it is not applicable to the real world.

The **bildungsroman** is a novel which centres around a person's coming-of-age or the process of their spiritual maturing. Arguably, the creature's perspective of the novel conforms to the bildungsroman genre.