AQA English Literature GCSE

Frankenstein: Themes

Science

This work by PMT Education is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Science

Theme Summary



Context - Galvanism

Shelley was writing during the Georgian era when the public were greatly divided regarding **scientific advancements**. Newly emerging ideas about science were at war with ideas about religion. Electricity was a relatively new concept, and ideas such as Luigi Galvani's **galvanism** were a threat to the **status quo**.

Galvani and Frankenstein both harness the force which brings creatures to life, something which many **contemporary** readers would have frowned on as **'playing God'**.

Presentation of the Theme

Isolation and Individuality

In *Frankenstein*, Shelley often associates scientific experiments with **isolation** and being self-focused. Shelley presents Victor as being in direct **opposition** to the female characters' selfless nature such as Justine, Elizabeth and Caroline. Victor expresses ***"the world to me was a secret which I desired to divine"***. Through Victor's experiment being a ***"secret",*** Shelley aligns Victor with **Romanticism**, which valued the power of the individual. The reference to ***"divine"*** encourages the reader to consider how Victor **transgresses** religion through his attempt to create life.



Ethical Implications – The Bodysnatchers

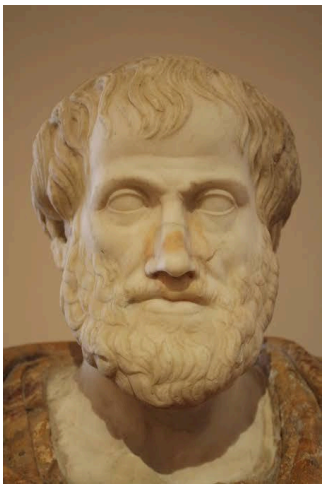
Scientists were beginning to study human **anatomy** through looking at cadavers and dissecting them. **Bodysnatching** massively grew in popularity as a means of better understanding the human body. **Burke and Hare** (1827-8) sold corpses to doctors 'fresh' by murdering people as opposed to taking the bodies from the grave.

CC BY NC ND

Since Shelley's first edition of the novel was published in 1818, Shelley would not have been familiar with Burke and Hare until her second edition of the novel in 1831. Victor assembling the body using limbs stolen from corpses mirrors Burke and Hare and further emphasises Victor's immoral nature and taps into the ethical implications of scientific investigations.

Shelley portrays Victor as viewing dead bodies with total detachment and neutrality in order to warn of the ethical ramifications of scientific experiments on the human body, where humans devalue emotions entirely. Despite a churchyard typically being associated with religion, Victor considers it ***"merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life".***

Chemistry



Although Frankenstein is often referred to as a doctor by modern readers, he only studies philosophy and chemistry, therefore, is not qualified as a doctor, despite chemistry becoming Frankenstein's ***"sole occupation"***.

In the early 1800s, chemistry was beginning to emerge as its own distinct discipline, with Sir Humphry Davy being the most prominent chemist of the period. Despite chemistry becoming its own discipline, Waldman warns Victor of the dangers of being only a ***"petty experimentalist"*** if he neglects the other scientific branches.

Science and Obsession



Shelley's use of the metaphor of scientific pursuit as a ***"continual food"*** elucidates how Victor's obsession with science becomes his sustenance, and like food, it is necessary for him to survive. Likewise, ***"continual"*** emphasises how his appetite is never fully quenched. Shelley may be warning of the dangers of tying identity so closely to scientific endeavours, and foreshadows Victor's later dependence on his scientific experiments.

Without his scientific pursuit, Victor lacks a purpose for living. In the same manner that excessive food consumption can cause mental and physical decline, Victor's addiction to his scientific pursuit wreaks havoc on his health.