

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

Frankenstein: Themes Science

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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

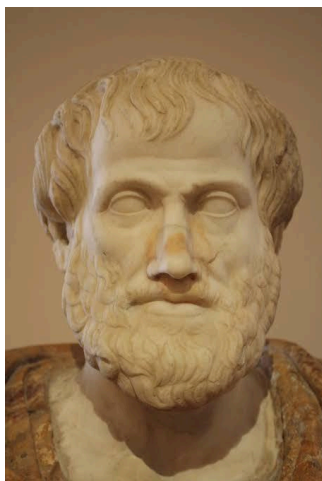
Scientists were beginning to study human **anatomy** through looking at cadavers and dissecting them. **Bodysnatching** massively grew in popularity as a means of better understanding the human body. **Burke and Hare** (1827-8) sold corpses to doctors 'fresh' by murdering people as opposed to taking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



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.

