

Intro

Author: Mary Shelley

Published: 1818 (first edition); revised edition in 1831

Genre: Gothic Novel, Science Fiction, Romanticism

Setting: 18th-century Europe, including Switzerland, Germany, and the Arctic

Narrative Style: Frame narrative with multiple first-person perspectives, primarily that of Victor Frankenstein and his creature

Historical and Literary Context

Romanticism: **Core Ideas:** Focused on individualism, the power of nature, emotion, and the sublime. Frankenstein reflects these themes through its exploration of the individual's quest for knowledge and the awe-inspiring, sometimes terrifying power of nature.

Reaction to Enlightenment: While the Enlightenment emphasized reason and scientific progress, Romanticism highlighted the limits of reason and the potential dangers of unchecked ambition, a key theme in Frankenstein.

Historical and Literary Context (cont)

Scientific Revolution and Early 19th Century: **Influences:** The novel was written during a period of rapid scientific advancements, including early experiments with electricity and galvanism (the idea of using electricity to animate life), which inspired Shelley's depiction of Frankenstein's experiments.

Promethean Ambition: The novel can be read as a cautionary tale about the dangers of overreaching in the pursuit of knowledge, drawing on the myth of Prometheus, who defied the gods by giving fire (symbolizing knowledge) to humanity, and was punished for it.

The Gothic Tradition: **Gothic Elements:** Frankenstein includes many Gothic tropes, such as the isolated, tormented hero (Victor), the monstrous other (the Creature), the use of dark, foreboding settings (the Arctic, desolate mountains), and an exploration of the boundaries between life and death.

Historical and Literary Context (cont)

The Sublime: Shelley often describes nature in ways that evoke the sublime—a mixture of beauty, terror, and awe—mirroring the novel's themes of creation and destruction.

Plot Summary

Frame Narrative: **Robert Walton's Letters:** The novel opens and closes with letters from Robert Walton, an Arctic explorer, to his sister, Margaret Saville. Walton's letters frame the main narrative and establish the themes of ambition and the quest for knowledge.

Exposition: **Victor Frankenstein's Background:** Victor, a young scientist from Geneva, recounts his idyllic childhood, his fascination with science, and his obsession with uncovering the secrets of life. He becomes particularly interested in the works of alchemists and later in the burgeoning field of natural philosophy (science).

Rising Action: **Creation of the Creature:** While studying at the University of Ingolstadt, Victor secretly works on creating life, eventually animating a creature made from assembled body parts. However, horrified by his creation's appearance, Victor abandons it, leading to catastrophic consequences.



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Plot Summary (cont)

The Creature's Story: The Creature, abandoned and rejected by society, educates himself by observing a family (the De Laceys) and reading books. He becomes increasingly bitter and vengeful after experiencing constant rejection due to his appearance.

Climax: The Creature's Demand: The Creature confronts Victor and demands that he create a female companion for him. Victor initially agrees but later destroys the second creation out of fear of the consequences. In revenge, the Creature kills Victor's friend Henry Clerval and later, his bride, Elizabeth, on their wedding night.

Falling Action: Victor's Pursuit of the Creature: Devastated by the deaths of his loved ones, Victor vows to hunt down and destroy the Creature. This pursuit leads him to the Arctic, where he encounters Walton.

Resolution: The Death of Victor and the Creature: Victor dies from exhaustion in Walton's ship. The Creature, mourning his creator's death and expressing his own suffering, vows to end his life and disappears into the Arctic, leaving his ultimate fate ambiguous.

Main Characters

Victor Frankenstein: **Character Overview:** A young, brilliant scientist whose obsession with creating life leads to his downfall. Victor embodies the dangers of unchecked ambition and the pursuit of knowledge without consideration of the consequences.

Role in the Plot: Victor's actions drive the narrative, from his creation of the Creature to his ultimate quest for revenge. His tragic flaw is his hubris—believing he can transcend the natural limits of human capability.

The Creature (Frankenstein's Monster): **Character Overview:** Victor's creation, often mistakenly referred to as "Frankenstein," is a being of enormous strength and intellect but is rejected by society due to his grotesque appearance. The Creature's journey is one of self-awareness, loneliness, and increasing bitterness.

Main Characters (cont)

Symbolism: The Outcast: The Creature represents the consequences of social rejection and the question of what makes someone truly human.

Symbolism: Nature vs. Nurture: His character challenges the reader to consider whether evil is innate or a product of one's environment and treatment by others.

Symbolism: The Double of Victor: The Creature can be seen as Victor's double, embodying his dark, unchecked desires and the consequences of his hubristic pursuit of knowledge.

Robert Walton: **Character Overview:** The Arctic explorer whose letters frame the narrative. Walton's ambition to reach the North Pole parallels Victor's quest for knowledge, serving as a warning of the dangers of overreaching.



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Main Characters (cont)

Role in the Plot: Walton's interactions with Victor provide insight into Victor's character and serve to frame the main narrative. He ultimately heeds Victor's warnings and abandons his dangerous mission, demonstrating growth and self-awareness.

Elizabeth Lavenza: **Character Overview:** Victor's cousin and fiancée, Elizabeth represents the idealized, passive woman of the 19th century. She is kind, beautiful, and devoted to Victor, but her role is largely passive, making her a symbol of the domestic ideal.

Role in the Plot: Elizabeth's murder by the Creature on her wedding night represents the ultimate consequence of Victor's actions. Her death serves as the catalyst for Victor's final descent into madness and obsession.

Main Characters (cont)

Henry Clerval: **Character Overview:** Victor's best friend and foil, Clerval represents the Romantic ideal of the artist and the lover of nature. He is gentle, compassionate, and imaginative, providing a contrast to Victor's more scientific and rational approach.

Role in the Plot: Clerval's murder by the Creature serves as a further punishment for Victor and a turning point in the narrative, deepening Victor's guilt and despair.

Alphonse Frankenstein: **Character Overview:** Victor's father, who embodies the traditional values of duty and responsibility. Alphonse represents the older generation's more grounded, moral perspective.

Role in the Plot: His role is largely supportive, providing guidance and care for Victor, though he is ultimately powerless to save his son from his tragic fate.

Main Characters (cont)

Justine Moritz: **Character Overview:** A servant in the Frankenstein household, Justine is wrongfully executed for the murder of Victor's younger brother, William, a crime actually committed by the Creature. Justine's trial and execution highlight the themes of justice and injustice in the novel.

Role in the Plot: Justine's fate underscores the consequences of Victor's secrecy and irresponsibility, contributing to his growing sense of guilt.

Major Themes

The Pursuit of Knowledge and Its Consequences: The novel explores the dangers of overreaching in the pursuit of knowledge. Victor's quest to discover the secret of life leads to catastrophic consequences, suggesting that some knowledge is too dangerous for humanity to possess.



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Major Themes (cont)

Isolation and Alienation: Both Victor and the Creature experience profound isolation. Victor isolates himself from his family and friends in his obsessive pursuit of scientific knowledge, while the Creature is alienated from society due to his monstrous appearance. This theme underscores the novel's exploration of the human need for companionship and the dangers of social rejection.

The Role of Nature: Nature plays a dual role in Frankenstein. It is both a source of solace and beauty (as seen in Victor's descriptions of the Swiss landscape) and a force of destruction and terror (as represented by the Creature and the harsh Arctic environment). The novel reflects the Romantic ideal of the sublime, where nature is both awe-inspiring and frightening.

Major Themes (cont)

Creation and Responsibility: Frankenstein raises important questions about the responsibilities of creators towards their creations. Victor's failure to care for and guide his creation leads to the Creature's turn towards violence and revenge. The novel suggests that with great power comes great responsibility, and the neglect of this duty can lead to devastating consequences.

The Danger of Ambition: Victor's tragic flaw is his ambition, which blinds him to the moral and ethical implications of his actions. His story serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked ambition and the desire to play God.

Justice and Injustice: The novel highlights the theme of justice through the wrongful accusations and executions of Justine and the unfair treatment of the Creature. Shelley critiques the legal and social systems of the time, questioning their ability to deliver true justice.

Major Themes (cont)

The Double: Victor and the Creature are often seen as doubles or doppelgängers of each other, representing two sides of the same coin. This theme reflects the duality of human nature and the thin line between creator and destroyer, man and monster.

Narrative Structure and Style

Frame Narrative: The use of a frame narrative, with Walton's letters enclosing Victor's story, which in turn encloses the Creature's narrative, adds layers of perspective and complexity to the novel. It also enhances the theme of isolation, as each narrative is a personal account of individual experience.

Epistolary Elements: The inclusion of letters, such as those from Walton to his sister, and Victor's narrative as a spoken or written account, creates a sense of realism and immediacy. This structure also allows Shelley to explore multiple viewpoints and the subjective nature of truth.



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Narrative Structure and Style (cont)

Gothic Style: Shelley employs many elements of Gothic literature, including dark and foreboding settings, themes of horror and the supernatural, and a focus on human emotion and psychology. The novel's language is rich in imagery and symbolism, contributing to its haunting and tragic tone.

Romantic Imagery: The novel frequently uses Romantic imagery to evoke the sublime, particularly in its descriptions of nature. This imagery reflects the novel's exploration of the power and beauty of nature, as well as its capacity for destruction.

Reception and Legacy

Initial Reception: Upon its publication, Frankenstein was met with a mixture of praise and criticism. Some reviewers appreciated its originality and exploration of complex themes, while others criticized it for its dark subject matter and perceived moral ambiguity.

Reception and Legacy (cont)

Influence on Literature and Popular Culture: Frankenstein is often credited as one of the first science fiction novels, laying the groundwork for the genre by exploring the consequences of scientific experimentation and the creation of life. Its influence can be seen in countless works of literature, film, and other media that explore similar themes.

Adaptations: The novel has been adapted into numerous films, plays, and other media, each interpreting the story in different ways. The Creature, often referred to simply as "Frankenstein," has become an iconic figure in popular culture, though often mischaracterized as a mindless monster.

Reception and Legacy (cont)

Scholarly Interpretation: Frankenstein has been the subject of extensive academic analysis, with interpretations focusing on themes such as gender, power, and the ethics of creation. Feminist readings of the novel, for example, have explored the ways in which it critiques patriarchal power and the marginalization of women.

Enduring Relevance: The novel's exploration of the dangers of unchecked scientific ambition, the ethical responsibilities of creators, and the consequences of social rejection remain relevant today. Frankenstein continues to be a powerful cautionary tale about the potential consequences of playing God.

Conclusion

Summary: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is a complex and multi-layered novel that explores timeless themes of ambition, creation, and the human condition. Through its Gothic and Romantic elements, it offers a profound meditation on the dangers of overreaching in the pursuit of knowledge and the responsibilities that come with the power to create life.



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