

Robert Walton

The main narrator of the story, Walton is an explorer on his way to find the North Pole when he meets Victor. On hearing Victor's story, he records it in a series of letters to his sister. He is similar to Victor in his passion for scientific discovery, ambition and desire for glory. He is also largely self-taught, another link with Victor.

At first, Walton seems willing to sacrifice the men on his ship for the sake of his ambition. He is asked by Victor when they first meet: 'Do you share my madness?'

Walton felt very lonely before meeting Victor, and they become good friends in the short time they spend together. He shares this loneliness and need for companionship with the Monster.

When Victor dies Walton feels very sad and thinks about carrying out Victor's wish to find and kill the Monster. But when he discovers the Monster grieving over Victor's corpse he feels sorry for it. He learns from Victor's story the foolishness of great ambition, and turns back rather than continue his search for the Pole. This shows he is at last aware of other people and their safety, something Victor ignored.

The De Lacey Family

De Lacey is an old, blind man who is looked after by his son (Felix) and daughter (Agatha). The family inspires the Monster with their love and kindness to each other.

The Monster sees this natural goodness in De Lacey and waits for a time to talk to him alone. De Lacey is the only character to ever show kindness to the Monster, and his blindness means he is not prejudiced towards it.

Justine Moritz

The housekeeper for the Frankenstein family. Accused of William's murder, Justine is the stolid martyr who goes to her death with grace and dignity. If William's death symbolizes the loss of innocence, Justine's death marks the end of all that is noble and righteous.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Passive Women

For a novel written by the daughter of an important feminist, Frankenstein is strikingly devoid of strong female characters. The novel is littered with passive women who suffer calmly and then expire: Caroline Beaufort is a self-sacrificing mother who dies taking care of her adopted daughter; Justine is executed for murder, despite her innocence; the creation of the female

monster is aborted by Victor because he fears being unable to control her actions once she is animated; Elizabeth waits, impatient but helpless, for Victor to return to her, and she is eventually murdered by the monster. One can argue that Shelley renders her female characters so passive and subjects them to such ill treatment in order to call attention to the obsessive and destructive behaviour that Victor and the monster exhibit.

Abortion

The motif of abortion recurs as both Victor and the monster express their sense of the monster's hideousness. About first seeing his creation, Victor says: "When I thought of him, I gnashed my teeth, my eyes became inflamed, and I ardently wished to extinguish that life which I had so thoughtlessly made." The monster feels a similar disgust for himself: "I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on." Both lament the monster's existence and wish that Victor had never engaged in his act of creation.

The motif appears also in regard to Victor's other pursuits. When Victor destroys his work on a female monster, he literally aborts his act of creation, preventing the female monster from coming alive. Figurative abortion materializes in Victor's description of natural philosophy: "I at once gave up my former occupations; set down natural history and all its progeny as a deformed and abortive creation; and entertained the greatest disdain for a would-be science, which could never even step within the threshold of real knowledge." As with the monster, Victor becomes dissatisfied with natural philosophy and shuns it not only as unhelpful but also as intellectually grotesque.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colours used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Light & Fire

"What could not be expected in the country of eternal light?" asks Walton, displaying a faith in, and optimism about, science. In Frankenstein, light symbolizes knowledge, discovery, and enlightenment. The natural world is a place of dark secrets, hidden passages, and unknown mechanisms; the goal of the scientist is then to reach light. The dangerous and more powerful cousin of light is fire. The monster's first experience with a still-smouldering flame reveals the dual nature of fire: he discovers excitedly that it creates light in the darkness of the night, but also that it harms him when he touches it.

THE CASE OF FRANKENSTEIN

Alphonse Frankenstein

Victor's father. He suffers from illness probably brought on from his advanced age and depression from the events that have happened.

Caroline Frankenstein

Victor's mother. Caroline dies of scarlet fever when Victor is 17. Caroline was very involved in charity work — much like Mary Shelley and her mother Mary Wollstonecraft — especially for families in poverty.

William Frankenstein

Victor's youngest brother who is killed by the monster. Symbolically, William's murder is the turning point of the novel, when turmoil engulfs the Frankenstein family and all innocence is lost in the family. Also, William's death signals for the reader the end of Victor's belief that his actions can have no consequences.

Henry Clerval

Victor's best friend who helps Victor in his time of need. The monster kills Henry after Victor breaks his promise of creating a female companion for the monster. He studies language at the University of Ingolstadt and is totally unaware of Victor's creation.

Elizabeth Lavenza

The orphan child taken in by the Frankenstein family and lovingly raised with Victor. Elizabeth later becomes Victor's wife and is killed by the monster on their honeymoon. She is a champion for the poor and underprivileged.

Monstrosity

This theme pervades the entire novel, as the monster lies at the centre of the action. Eight feet tall and hideously ugly, the monster is rejected by society. However, his monstrosity results not only from his grotesque appearance but also from the unnatural manner of his creation, which involves the secretive animation of a mix of stolen body parts and strange chemicals. He is a product not of collaborative scientific effort but of dark, supernatural workings.

The monster is only the most literal of a number of monstrous entities in the novel, including the knowledge that Victor used to create the monster (see "Dangerous Knowledge"). One can argue that Victor himself is a kind of monster, as his ambition, secrecy, and selfishness alienate him from human society. Ordinary on the outside, he may be the true "monster" inside, as he is eventually consumed by an obsessive hatred of his creation. Finally,

Secrecy

Victor conceives of science as a mystery to be probed; its secrets, once discovered, must be jealously guarded. Victor's entire obsession with creating life is shrouded in secrecy, and his obsession with destroying the monster remains equally secret until Walton hears his tale.

Whereas Victor continues in his secrecy out of shame and guilt, the monster is forced into seclusion by his grotesque appearance. Walton serves as the final confessor for both, and their tragic relationship becomes immortalized in Walton's letters. In confessing all just before he dies, Victor escapes the stifling secrecy that has ruined his life; likewise, the monster takes advantage of Walton's presence to forge a human connection, hoping desperately that at last someone will understand, and empathize with, his miserable existence.

Texts

Frankenstein is overflowing with texts: letters, notes, journals, inscriptions, and books fill the novel, sometimes nestled inside each other, other times simply alluded to or quoted. Walton's letters envelop the entire tale; Victor's story fits inside Walton's letters; the monster's story fits inside Victor's; and the love story of Felix and Safie and references to Paradise Lost fit inside the monster's story. This profusion of texts is an important aspect of the narrative structure, as the various writings serve as concrete manifestations of characters' attitudes and emotions.

Language plays an enormous role in the monster's development. By hearing and watching the peasants, the monster learns to speak and read, which enables him to understand the manner of his creation, as described in Victor's journal. He later leaves notes for Victor along the chase into the northern ice, inscribing words in trees and on rocks, turning nature itself into a writing surface.

Prejudice

Or judging people with little or no evidence, is a recurring theme throughout Frankenstein. The first major incidence of it comes when Victor abandons his creature. Worse, when he wakes to see it reach out to him just hours after its 'birth', Victor assumes it means harm. In fact, it is simply the natural action of a 'child' reaching out for its 'parent'. People who come across the Monster are all deceived by its appearance into thinking it will do them harm, when in reality it has been born with completely pure and good intentions. It is attacked by townspeople, beaten by Felix (who it thought could be a friend) and shot at by a peasant. It is no wonder it turns evil in the face of such prejudice. Shelley makes us question how we treat those who appear monstrous when we may be monsters ourselves.

Victor also suffers prejudice, in parallel with the Monster, when he is washed up in Ireland and treated with immediate suspicion and anger, called a 'villain', and accused of a murder he did not commit. Justine suffers prejudice, and pays with her life, when she is accused of murdering a child. That child, William, is himself prejudiced. He insults the Monster with the same words Victor uses against it, when all it wanted was to make friends. Shelley is constantly showing her readers the destructive and isolating nature of prejudice.

The Monster

The creature created by Victor Frankenstein while at the University of Ingolstadt. "Formed into a hideous and gigantic creature," the monster faces rejection and fear from his creator and society. The monster's rejection from society pushes him to commit murder against his creator's family.

Although Victor selects the Monster's body parts so that it will be beautiful, when it is given life it looks hideously ugly. This leads ordinary people to be scared of the Monster and mistreat it.

The Monster is of good character, and does many kind things (for example, helping the De Lacey's to harvest their crops and saving the peasant girl from drowning).

It is turned bad through Victor's and other's mistreatment. The Monster lacks company and only ever wants friendship. This is why it asks Victor to build it a wife.

It is very clever, learning to speak and read by secretly watching the De Lacey's. Its speech is sophisticated and persuasive, helping us to have sympathy for it. Unlike Victor, the Monster regrets its bad actions at the end of the book. It also shows love for Victor at the end. Its last action is to commit suicide when it discovers its 'father' is dead.

Themes

Dangerous Knowledge

The pursuit of knowledge is at the heart of Frankenstein, as Victor attempts to surge beyond accepted human limits and access the secret of life. Likewise, Robert Walton attempts to surpass previous human explorations by endeavouring to reach the North Pole. This ruthless pursuit of knowledge, of the light (see "Light and Fire"), proves dangerous, as Victor's act of creation eventually results in the destruction of everyone dear to him, and Walton finds himself perilously trapped between sheets of ice. Whereas Victor's obsessive hatred of the monster drives him to his death, Walton ultimately pulls back from his treacherous mission, having learned from Victor's example how destructive the thirst for knowledge can be.

Self-discovery

The novel begins with Walton describing his own voyage of discovery, which he hopes will lead him to the North Pole. On meeting Victor, he hears of another tale of discovery, that of the secret of creating life itself. The Monster is also on a path of self-discovery, and all three characters share a powerful desire to acquire knowledge - a desire that ultimately leads two of them to their deaths, and which very nearly kills Walton. The Monster quite naturally seeks knowledge about where it came from and how to survive in a hostile world. Through patient endeavour, it learns how to speak and read. But the knowledge it gains only leads it to curse its existence. It knows that it can never be accepted in the world of man, yet craves human company and the love of the father who abandoned it. Finally, through learning of the 'sanguinary (bloody) laws of man', the Monster is taught that it can be acceptable to kill in some circumstances. This knowledge leads to the deaths of many innocent people.

Victor Frankenstein puts others' lives at risk, as well as his own, through his ambitious pursuit of knowledge. He neglects his loving family and allows his health to suffer greatly in his obsession to discover the secret of creating life out of death.

Shelley makes it clear she believes knowledge such as this cannot lead to good. Some benefit may have come from finding a way to the North Pole, but no good is shown to come from Victor's creation of the Monster.

She shows Victor's 'success' to have severe and tragic consequences that should serve as a warning to scientists, past, present and future, that knowledge is a very dangerous thing and should only be used for the good of mankind - and certainly not personal gain.

Sublime Nature

The sublime natural world, embraced by Romanticism (late eighteenth century to mid-nineteenth century) as a source of unrestrained emotional experience for the individual, initially offers characters the possibility of spiritual renewal. Mired in depression and remorse after the deaths of William and Justine, for which he feels responsible, Victor heads to the mountains to lift his spirits. Likewise, after a hellish winter of cold and abandonment, the monster feels his heart lighten as spring arrives. The influence of nature on mood is evident throughout the novel, but for Victor, the natural world's power to console him wanes when he realizes that the monster will haunt him no matter where he goes. By the end, as Victor chases the monster obsessively, nature, in the form of the Arctic desert, functions simply as the symbolic backdrop for his primal struggle against the monster.

Isolation

Frankenstein is full of characters who suffer physical or emotional isolation. Shelley deliberately chose settings that would emphasise this, such as the remote vastness of the Arctic Circle, where the story begins and ends. Walton chooses to isolate himself in this frozen wasteland, yet soon regrets the absence of a true companion on his expedition. Victor confronting the monster up in the mountains, the image title is 'indifference'. Victor also chooses to isolate himself, firstly at university in Ingolstadt, when he avoids contact with his family to work on the Monster. Later, he neglects Elizabeth (his most loving, unfailing companion) out of fear she will discover his secret. He then chooses the remote Orkney Islands on which to embark on the construction of the second creature, and seems most comfortable when surrounded by the wilderness of vast lakes, towering mountains or wild heathland.

It is no surprise that when Victor meets the Monster for the first time since its creation the setting is high up in the Swiss Alps. Both are drawn to it as a place where they can attempt to escape reminders of what they have done and become. Also, sublime landscapes such as these overwhelming remind the reader of the characters' insignificance compared with the awesome power of nature.

The Monster is another victim of isolation. Unlike Walton and Victor, it does not bring this upon itself. Indeed, it tries early on to make contact with humans and connect with them, but is always abused, leading to self-imposed isolation in the hovel next to the De Lacey's cottage.

The torment it feels at being excluded from society in general, and loving companionship in particular, is what makes it ask Victor for a mate. When it later witnesses Victor tearing this mate to pieces, it sees a lifetime of isolation ahead and only then commits its most terrible crimes. Shelley's point here is that isolation, whether self-imposed or not, can only bring about unhappiness, a breakdown in civilisation and, ultimately, tragic consequences.

