

## Frankenstein: Themes

- The elements

In a novel which deals with power and raw, elemental emotion, it is not surprising that Shelley makes extensive use of the elements. The power of the natural world is an apt representation of the characters' shifting emotions. These are often externalised using the elements, such as when Frankenstein observes after Elizabeth's murder: 'the sun might shine, or the clouds might lower; but nothing could appear to me as it had done the day before.'

Shelley's use of the elements is highly significant, especially her deployment of pathetic fallacy (use of the weather or the landscape to reflect events, moods etc) to create atmosphere. The most striking use of the elements occurs at moments in the novel where rationality and balance are least in evidence.

The elements are a central part of the nature that Frankenstein loves so much. At times however they are part of his punishment. The physical punishments of cold and exposure on the sea of ice, for example, and the hardship of the elements on the Scottish isle, are like divine retribution for his presumption in creating life and his foolhardiness.

The power of the electrical storm when Frankenstein returns to Switzerland starts a thread of elemental imagery which runs throughout the novel. The electrical storm makes possible Frankenstein's experiments with galvanism and the creation of the monster: the awesome, destructive power of the storm represents the destructive power of Frankenstein's own desires.

- Nature

Shelley had very close connections with the Romantic movement, which was profoundly engaged with the natural world. Her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, was one of the great Romantic poets, as was his close friend Lord Byron. Wordsworth was also a major figure, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* had a particularly profound influence on the novel.

The Romantics saw nature with its abundance and wildness as symbolising everything they admired and wished to promote. They rejected what they saw as the restrictions of balance, order, and objectivity and profoundly mistrusted the advances of empirical science. Frankenstein, the empirical scientist, wishes to apply rigid, scientific rules to the act of creation, producing an object not beautiful but hideous.

The range of extreme and dangerous locations that Shelley employs reflects the nature of her tale and the perilous moral dilemmas it deals with. These landscapes and locations also resonate with the key themes of isolation, death and destruction. They symbolise the inner turmoil and upheaval of the monster, Frankenstein and other characters.

The ambiguity of nature – both beautifully creative but powerfully destructive is key to understanding Frankenstein.

- Good and Evil

The tale is an exploration of good and evil in the human soul. The novel explores how good can be turned into evil. The monster initially loving and benevolent is transformed by his rejection by humanity into a vengeful predator. The monster's initial loving and kind nature is corrupted by his association with man. It also considers the potential of human science and human nature for both good and evil.

- Death and Destruction

Death, destruction, putrefaction and disease are closely linked in Frankenstein. From early on we know that Frankenstein cannot survive for long after his rescue from the drifting ice; he is mortally ill. Death constantly hangs over events; one by one Frankenstein's family dies at the hands of the monster. It is ironic, however that these deaths spring from Frankenstein's driving desire to create life.

Physical death and destruction can symbolise the death of Frankenstein's moral responsibility, the destruction of his hopes and dreams and the breakdown of the monster's innocence. It is therefore fitting that the novel should end with the deaths of both creator and created. Life becomes a living death for both the monster and Frankenstein. Frankenstein wishes for death after the murder of Clerval.

'I was overcome by gloom and misery, and often reflected I had better seek death'

'[I am] they creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us.'

- The Supernatural

The supernatural in Frankenstein is unusual. While the novel fits within the Gothic genre, which frequently deals with the supernatural and refers to the supernatural on many occasions, it deals not with ghosts and spirits but with reality. The consequences of Frankenstein's scientific experiments. The monster is superhuman – taller, stronger than his human counterparts- but he is not supernatural. The monster is flesh and blood (albeit constituted from the reanimation of various parts of corpses).

Shelley is restrained and mysterious in her description of the monster except for Frankenstein's brief description of the monster's watery eyes and yellow skin allowing the contemporary readers to paint a picture for themselves.

Although the creature is a creature of flesh and blood with genuine human emotions, other characters often react to him as if he were a ghost. As he stalks Frankenstein across Europe, he shares many ghost-like qualities. The ability to appear almost out of nowhere being one of them,

his ability to survive on barely any food (nuts and berries), his ability to traverse Europe with no money, presumably stowing away on ships. He can be compared to other Gothic wanderers like Dracula, Melmoth and the Wandering Jew.

Other typical supernatural elements are incorporated into Frankenstein through Shelley's use of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* with its supernatural occurrences and *Paradise Lost* with its angels and demons.

- Dreams

Dreams are important in two ways: first as hopes and aspirations; secondly as sleeping visions. For Victor, they impinge on each other - in trying to live out his aspirations as a scientist, he creates a living nightmare.

'The whole series of my life appeared to me as a dream; I sometimes doubted if indeed it were all true, for it never presented itself to my mind with the force of reality.'

'The past appeared to me in the light of a fearful dream.'

'Towards morning I was possessed by a kind of nightmare'

- Sanity and insanity

On many occasions in the novel we question the sanity of what we observe and the characters often do so themselves. Frankenstein's and Walton's frantic pursuit of their dreams creates an atmosphere of unpredictability and fear. At the outset Frankenstein alerts us to the unbelievable (insane?) nature of his story. The persistent presence of madness also serves to emphasise the dangers inherent in Frankenstein's enterprise. Frankenstein breaks down after the death of Elizabeth and literally ends up incarcerated in an asylum.

'For they had called me mad; and during many months, as I understood, a solitary cell had been my habitation.'

- Revenge

Frankenstein and the monster are locked in an endless cycle of vengeance. Frankenstein's refusal to care for the creature makes this inevitable. The monster wishes to avenge the lack of care and love that he rightly considers is his due. Frankenstein's failure to do this leads to the monster's isolation and loneliness. The monster seeks revenge not in killing Victor but in destroying everything he loves. In his turn Frankenstein wishes for vengeance, seeking to destroy his creation. '[I] ardently prayed that I might have him within my grasp to wreak a great and signal revenge on his cursed head.'

- Exploration

Frankenstein is full of explorers and exploration. Walton is seeking to find the Polar passage, Frankenstein is exploring the mysteries of science. Shelley herself explores human experience

and the dark recesses of the human mind. Nearly a century before the work of Freud and Jung Shelley is exploring the divided self and the shadowy world of dreams. The novel is also exploratory taking the Gothic into new psychological depths and paving the way for science fiction.

- Imprisonment and confinement

Frankenstein is increasingly imprisoned within dreams and fantasies that resolve into nightmarish reality. He finds himself trapped into a relationship with the monster and a promise to create a partner for him which he then disastrously breaks. Both Frankenstein and the monster are trapped in a cycle of revenge and hatred. Frankenstein is literally imprisoned in Ireland after being wrongfully accused of Clerval's murder (echoing Justine's wrongful imprisonment and death). But declares 'to me the walls of a dungeon or palace were alike hateful.' And later put into solitary confinement in an asylum.

The monster, rejected by Frankenstein and society, and trapped in isolation. His kindly benevolent nature is trapped by the ugliness of his body. The hovel where he lives next to the De Lacey's is a pathetic symbol of his confinement, he can only leave when it is dark. The monster's rejection is universal so the world becomes for him a prison he can only escape through death.

Elizabeth is trapped by her barren relationship with Victor. Frankenstein leaves her alone on her wedding night in a blind attempt to protect her from the monster. Safie's father is incarcerated in a Parisian prison, the victim of racial discrimination. Safie is trapped by her father's desire to control her destiny. De Lacey is trapped in a world of blindness, although ironically this enables him to be the only person to see the monster's essential humanity.

- Human and inhuman

Humans are often guilty of great inhumanity. The monster is shot after rescuing a girl from drowning, he is chased out by Felix after he finds him talking to De Lacey. Shelley's treatment of this issue causes us to question humanity's ability to treat others with kindness and love. The monster in a Marxist interpretation can be seen as symbolic of the oppressed working classes, trying to better himself but treated with disdain and horror by those in a better position than him.

- Loneliness and isolation

Frankenstein isolates himself in his studies in Ingolstadt from his family and friends and later from his fellow researchers. Walton laments his own isolation and lack of companionship. The monster is rejected by society due to his ugly appearance. Clerval, left alone by Frankenstein, is murdered. Elizabeth is left alone fatally on her wedding night. The De Lacey's become social outcasts. Justine is isolated in prison and threatened with excommunication by a priest. Safie is left alone in Paris, then forced to travel alone to find Felix.

- Ambition and Determination

Sometimes noble and sometimes less so. Frankenstein and Walton are determined to pursue their dreams. Frankenstein is later determined to pursue the monster and kill him. The monster shows determination in his ability to survive, his acquisition of knowledge and language and later in his own determination of revenge. The De Lacey and Safie show great loyalty and determination in the face of hardship.

- Journeys

Frankenstein and other characters make repeated journeys. In the later stages of the novel, Frankenstein and the monster are engaged in a perpetual journey. Their physical journeys often into rugged inhospitable places reflect the characters psychological journeys into the dark interiors of their minds.

- Science

Wordsworth, like other Romantics, decried what he called the 'meddling intellect' and looked for meaning in the human heart. He argued that science, with its tendency to dissect the natural world and its endless desire to define and categorise, was the negation of poetry. How far do you think this idea is useful when thinking about Frankenstein?

- Noble Science

There are clear signs that the pursuit of science can be both noble and elevating. The ability to explore and to analyse the world in which we live symbolizes the power of the human intellect, and at its best elevates the individual and improves the mass of humanity. Both Frankenstein and Walton begin their explorations in the hope of benefiting the world through their work. Frankenstein initially aspires to finding a way of preserving life while Walton wishes to find a quicker and safer trading route than those currently used by sailors.

- Dangerous Science

While Shelley is never overtly critical of the practice of science, she is keenly alert to its many potential pitfalls and dangers. Science seeks to extend the bounds of human knowledge, and this extension of the frontiers of conventional understanding is risky; it leads to moral choices, which may or may not be made sensibly. Walton and Frankenstein both struggle to contain their passion.

They are swayed by arrogant desire. Hearing of Walton's dreams of finding a polar passage, Frankenstein observes: 'Unhappy man! Do you share my madness? Have you drunk also of the intoxicating draught?'

The monster symbolises the destructive potential of irresponsible science. The monster symbolises Frankenstein's uncontrollable thirst for knowledge, externalising his monstrous desires and their hideous potential.

- Science and taboo

0203 565 0539

[www.trefoiltutors.co.uk](http://www.trefoiltutors.co.uk)  
[office@trefoiltutors.co.uk](mailto:office@trefoiltutors.co.uk)



Shelley demonstrates that the human race is on the brink of the unknown, and questions the wisdom of pressing heedlessly into it for fear of the 'monsters' that may emerge. Shelley's use of Milton and the stories of Adam and Eve suggests the forbidden nature of the scientific discoveries that Frankenstein pursues. Like Adam and Eve, he finds himself tempted to reach for the forbidden. He wants to push on to enter the secret citadels of science.

At the end of his life, Frankenstein recognises something of the error of his ways and the impact the pursuit of the forbidden has had upon him. He observes to Walton:

*'A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow his passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquility. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule.'*

*'If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind.'*