

Frankenstein

Social and Scientific context:

published in 1818

French Revolution ended in 1799; the Napoleonic Wars in 1815

Luigi Galvani published his results of experiments using electricity to cause muscle movement (frogs' legs, etc) in 1791; in the late 1770s, it had been shown that electrical shocks could stop and re-start the heart in a living creature (chickens) and even revive the dead (a young girl who had been in an accident and could be revived by no other means – it is probable that the shock, rather than defibrillating the heart actually restored consciousness when she was in a coma-like state, but at the time she had been declared dead and the shock was believed to have restored life). Volta's experiments applying electric shocks to recently hanged criminals was published in 1804.

Interest in anatomy and surgical dissection to discover more about the inner workings of the human body grew in the late 18th century and into the 19th. Grave robbing, to provide anatomy schools and medical students with cadavers to dissect, was common (particularly in London) in the 18th and 19th centuries.

General themes:

danger(s) of the unknown consequences of science and experimentation (“playing God”)

what's done cannot be undone

fear of science and its results

love *versus* rejection

arrogance of science (crops up repeatedly)

Characters:

Robert Walton (ship's captain)

explorer & adventurer

driven by a desire to expand human knowledge

infatuated by science

seeking a companion with “a cultured and capacious mind”

learnedness & knowledge highly valued, ‘gentlemanly’ attributes

intellectual arrogance: such attributes not found “among merchants and seamen”

Victor Frankenstein

driven by a desire to possess knowledge and to achieve

after creating the 'monster', driven by regret and compulsion to destroy his creation

supreme intellectual arrogance

Elizabeth

gentle and good

a contrast to both Frankenstein and the creature

victim of both Frankenstein (neglect of her, etc) and the creature

Creature

potential for good turned to evil by feelings of rejection and being an outcast

doomed to isolation

physically free but held captive by his feelings of hatred and desire for revenge

'alter ego' of Frankenstein?

Ideas to explore:

Fear of science

First hints that science (seeking knowledge of the world's secrets) may be dangerous found in the letters that open the story (letter 4).

Thirst for knowledge becomes obsessional, forcing aside all other considerations

Is science ethically neutral? Do scientists, engineers, etc, have a responsibility to speculate on the outcome(s) of their work? Is a scientist/engineer/inventor still responsible for the (unforeseen) consequences of his/her work once it is out in the world? (chs 7–9)

Human need for love

Frankenstein talks about his parents' great love for and devotion to him, saying they had, "a deep consciousness of what they owed towards the being to which they had given life." (ch 1). This stands in contrast to Frankenstein's own response to and feelings for the being to which he gave life, namely, rejection, abhorrence and hatred (ch 5).

Frankenstein was absorbed with the process of his endeavours – the work itself, and the knowledge he gained via the process. The end result of that process, the creature, was never what he wanted. He wanted power over life and death.

The rejection and lack of love that the creature experiences, first from Frankenstein, then from the exiled French family, create in him both self-loathing and jealous hatred towards humanity: what he wants to be, but isn't quite; a society that will

never accept him; those who judge him on his physical deformity rather than his character.

Arrogance of science (or scientists)

This comes up several times, right from the start of the story. It is seen in the 2nd letter written by Walton, and then again in chapter 4: "In other studies, you go as far as others have gone before you, and there is nothing more to know; but in a scientific pursuit there is continual food for discovery and wonder." This assertion that outside of science there is nothing more to know is pure hubris – a character flaw that crops up again and again in the young Frankenstein.

Religious themes

Is this a story of what humanity would be like without the presence of a loving God and creator? There are many allusions to the narratives found in Genesis:

There is, of course, the creation of the 'new man' (the creature) and imbuing him with the spark of life. (Not so far off from Gen 2, wherein God creates Adam from the dust of the earth and breathes life into him).

Frankenstein's desire to destroy the life he had created, "I ardently wished to extinguish the life which I had so thoughtlessly bestowed." (ch 9 [p517]) closely echoes God's feelings in the prelude to the Flood story of Genesis (6.5–7), "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.'"

The creature's desire for a female companion (chs 16–17) also has echoes of Genesis 2 (18, 21–23), "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.' ... So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man.'"

The creature's idea that he and his mate, once she is made, can go and live alone in a wilderness uninhabited by humans – just themselves and the wild animals, essentially – where they will have a vegan diet and live in peaceful co-existence with the other species there (ch 17) is describing nothing less than a desire for a return to Eden (Gen 1).

At one point, the creature says to Frankenstein, "I should have been your Adam." In other words, Frankenstein, in the role of God, is responsible for creating this life and should have blessed it and enabled it to flourish, as God did for the first humans (Gen 1).