

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

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 endeavoring 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.

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.

Monstrosity

Obviously, this theme pervades the entire novel, as the monster lies at the center 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, many critics have described the novel itself as monstrous, a stitched-together combination of different voices, texts, and tenses (see `TEXTS`).

Secrecy

Victor conceives of science as a mystery to be probed; its secrets, once discovered, must be jealously guarded. He considers M. Krempe, the natural philosopher he meets at Ingolstadt, a model scientist: “an uncouth man, but deeply imbued in the secrets of his science.” 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.

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 behavior 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 colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Light and 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-smoldering 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 presence of fire in the text also brings to mind the full title of Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus*. The Greek god Prometheus gave the knowledge of fire to humanity and was then severely punished for it. Victor, attempting to become a modern Prometheus, is certainly punished, but unlike fire, his “gift” to humanity—knowledge of the secret of life—remains a secret.