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Frankenstein

or The Modern Prometheus

by

Mary Shelley

1818



MonkeyNotes by PinkMonkey Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The novel starts with a sea-captain writing from St. Petersburg to his sister in England. Robert Walton, the sea-captain, is traveling towards the North Pole via Archangel when he encounters Victor Frankenstein. The focus of the book then shifts to Victor Frankenstein, whose story begins in Geneva, Switzerland, where he is born. Other European cities, which Victor's parents visit early in their marriage, are mentioned.

At the age of seventeen, Victor leaves for the university at Ingolstadt, where he spends six years. He creates the monster in an old deserted house in this city.

The novel is set mainly in Geneva against the backdrop of the Swiss Alps. Plainpalais in Geneva is the place where Frankenstein loses his brother, William. The mountains and lakes of Switzerland are prominent in the protagonist's life. Victor seeks refuge in the village and valley of Chamounix. For a change of.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Victor Frankenstein - the young scientist, around whose creation the story revolves. He can be said to be an example, or role-model, for Robert.

Elizabeth Lavenza Frankenstein - the "more than sister" of Victor Frankenstein. She is an adopted child, and she later marries Victor. The monster murders her after her marriage.

Henry Clerval - the son of a merchant and a dear friend of Victor's. He is often Victor's protector, and he becomes one of the victims of the "monster."

The "Monster" - the result of Victor's ambition. He is an enormous creature and a misfit in society. He is feared by all because of his appearance, and he learns to despise humankind. His goal is to destroy his creator, Victor Frankenstein.

Minor Characters

William Frankenstein - the younger brother of Victor. He falls prey to the "monster".

Ernest Frankenstein - also the younger brother of Victor. He wants to join the military and remains the sole surviving member of the Frankenstein family.

Alphonse Frankenstein - Victor's father. He is a man of character.....

Additional characters are identified in the complete study guide

CONFLICT

Protagonist - Victor Frankenstein is the creator of the "monster." Because of his thirst for knowledge, he goes too far and creates a huge monster, whom he immediately rejects. This rejection.....

Antagonist - The protagonist's creation turns against him. He is a creature with no name or identity. He is sensitive but highly misunderstood. His rejection by humankind leads.....

Climax - The desolation of the "monster" causes him to destroy Victor's life. He commands Victor to create another creature; this time it must be a female who will become his.....

Outcome -Victor does not succeed in killing the monster. His creation, however, succeeds in destroying almost everyone that Victor loves. Victor dies without realizing the full implications of.....

SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The plot deals with the conflict within Victor Frankenstein, who, due to his love of the natural sciences, produces a monstrous creature. Victor himself is disgusted at the sight of his creature and rejects him. All other humans likewise reject him because of his horrible appearance. The monster, frustrated and misunderstood, ultimately kills the people who are closely related to his creator, Victor Frankenstein.

This is the tale told by Victor to Robert Walton, a sea-captain on a voyage to the North Pole. Both Victor and Robert have much in common in terms of their childhood and their passion for knowledge. Both are explorers of a sort: Robert loves voyages, while Victor loves science. Each is prepared to go to any length to achieve his goals. Victor tells Robert his story so that he can learn to curb his extreme enthusiasm about achieving his goals.

The monster, too, has his own tale to tell. His sensitivity is awakened by Nature and the gentle manners of the family that he lives near. This is the De Lacey family, which is in exile. The family is brought to ruin and forced to seek refuge in a cottage in Germany, where the monster finds them.

When these people reject him, the creature destroys everything in sight. He now feels a tremendous hatred towards the human race. This is what sets him against his creator, whom he intends to.....

THEMES

Major Theme

The author explores the theme of playing God in a society which is constantly making “progress,” or technological advancement. Science appears as a savior, or so people think. Science is the last refuge of modern people, who believe it to be the panacea (cure-all) for all evil, regardless of the evil it brings with it. Playing God in this novel leads to chaos and gruesome murders.

Minor Themes

Another theme deals with Frankenstein’s new, unnatural mode for “creating” life. This new mode of creation, involving neither God nor womankind, leads ultimately to destruction. There is.....
Additional themes are identified in the complete study guide

MOOD

The mood is quite somber throughout the novel, particularly with the entry of the monster. It does have some touching episodes of happy family life among the Frankensteins, as well as among.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

MARY SHELLEY -Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was born in London in 1797. She was the daughter of the philosopher, William Godwin, and his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792).

In 1814 she met and fell in love with Percy Bysshe Shelley, the English Romantic poet. She eloped with him in July of 1814, taking along her stepsister, Claire Clairmont. But Mary and Shelley could not marry until Shelley’s wife, Harriet, died in 1816. Of Mary Shelley’s four children by the poet, only Percy Florence survived.

Some of her works include *The Last Man* (1826) and *Lodore* (1835). She also edited a.....

LITERARY/ HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The idea for *Frankenstein* developed when Lord Byron, Shelley, Mary and Polidori came together in the summer of 1816 in Switzerland. On a fateful day, they were confined indoors due to rain. Byron came up with the idea that each of them should write a ghost story to pass the time.

Byron's tale was included in a fragment at the end of his poem "Of Mateppa." Shelley based his story on the early experiences of his life, while Polidori's story was flimsy. Mary Shelley alone succeeded in.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

The novel is framed with a series of letters. This means that it begins and ends with letters, not chapters. The chapters start after the fourth letter. After twenty-four chapters, the series of letters resumes.

Letter 1

Summary

The novel begins with a series of letters from Robert Walton, who is writing from St. Petersburg to his sister, Margaret Saville, in England. He assures her that he is safe and is looking forward to his voyage which has been his dream for many years. He is delighted that his plans are working out well. He reminisces about how, as a child, he had neglected his education but was very fond of reading the histories of voyages. Unfortunately for him, his dying father had not allowed him to attempt a seafarer's life.

He then relates that the next thing he did was to try his hand at literature; he wrote poems for a year, but he failed at that endeavor. Luckily, he acquired some money and was able to pursue his former plans of becoming a sailor.

He has now been leading a seafarer's life for six years. Initially, he had to face a great deal of hardship. He recounts how he accompanied whalers on several expeditions to the North Sea, and survived the bitter cold, hunger, thirst and famine. However, he still managed to study mathematics, medicine and the physical sciences required of a sailor. He had also worked as an undermate with a Greenland whaler and had been offered a designation in the vessel.

He talks of traveling to Russia. He declares his plans to leave for Archangel in two week's time. He even plans to hire a ship out there for the purpose of whaling.

Notes

The novel begins with the epistolary form (in letters). The series of letters helps to keep the fantastic happenings of the larger narrative grounded in reality.

As Robert talks of the icy breeze that "fills him with delight," the readers realize how enthusiastic he is about his job as a sailor. He seems to possess a spirit for adventure, but he also expresses mixed feelings about his journey. His apprehension is combined with excitement about an undiscovered place. He reveals an ambition to discover new lands or unknown routes leading to the countries near the pole.

Robert's passion for a seafarer's life is revealed as he recalls his childhood, when he would read nothing but histories of voyages. He is lucky when he inherits his cousin's fortune, and he is able to follow his dreams. However, he mentions how he has endured hardships that could easily have discouraged him from going any further. But he continues his pursuit of adventure.

This letter also shows the tremendous love between Robert and his sister, Margaret. He is afraid he will not see her again and wishes her the best in life. The uncertainty of a sailor's life stands out here. As Robert says, his resolution and courage are firm, but his hopes fluctuate. This is because he is responsible not just for himself, but also for the other men, whose morale must be kept high.

The author begins by comparing the undiscovered geographical location with Robert's mental vision of it, as he tries to imagine the polar region for himself. But the focus later shifts to Robert's practical nature: he cannot let his visions hamper the actual details of the undiscovered land. For instance, he talks of a sunny land while referring to the North Pole, but then he insists that it will be bitterly cold and he must be fully prepared to face that reality.

Moreover, it is striking that Robert's sister should bear the same initials as the author herself, M.W.S.: Margaret Walton Saville.

Letter 2

Summary

While the first letter is written in the month of December, the second letter is written in March after Robert has hired a vessel and is busy organizing sailors for his expedition. But Robert is still looking for something else: a friend. He feels lonely and acknowledges a strong need to have a friend to share the joys and sorrows of his success or disappointment. He believes he cannot find a friend at all, but he does mention a lieutenant whom he has employed. Robert evidently admires him for his good qualities and describes how this lieutenant had once fallen in love with a rich Russian lady. He was willing to marry her, but on learning that she was in love with someone else, he abandoned the idea. Furthermore, he was generous enough to leave his entire fortune to his rival, who was much poorer than himself. Having overcome their financial worries, the couple was able to be married.

He also reveals to his sister that 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' had always been a major source of his enthusiasm and his passion for the sailor's life.

This letter also ends with a farewell note that addresses the possibility that Robert may never see his sister again.

Notes

Robert is seen rather depressed here, in contrast to the enthusiastic and excited sailor of Letter 1. His need for a friend is quite genuine. He does not think that expressing his thoughts on paper is a substitute for human contact. He blames his past for the fact that he is "self-educated," but "more illiterate" in reality. He feels he has missed out on a great deal in terms of companionship, having kept only books as companions for the twenty-eight years of his life. He says his dreams need "keeping" (he needs someone to confide his wishes in), and he needs a friend who will not reproach him for being a romantic, but will "regulate his mind" instead.

It is worth noting that this sense of loneliness that Robert faces is similar to that of the protagonist of the story. As will be seen subsequently, Victor was quite lonely at his time at the university when nobody around him echoed his romantic aspirations. The reader will come across a number of similar parallels between Robert and Victor.

Robert is resigned to the idea that he cannot find a friend anywhere on the wide ocean. He then talks about his lieutenant who appears to be a kind, gentle and mild-mannered person. Robert is evidently quite contented to have employed him. He feels an affinity with the lieutenant; both of them are kind-hearted and not likely to resort to violence, even in the often brutal atmosphere of sea life. Robert claims to have developed this gentle

attitude under the guidance of his kind sister. Critics such as Margaret Waller have noticed how male characters often exhibit typically “feminine” traits in Romantic literature.

The story of the lieutenant is rather intriguing. It is rather unusual that someone as benevolent as he should have few friends. He is a silent man, “who detracts from the sympathy and interest which otherwise he would command.” This disposition of cold reserve may be a result of his experience with unrequited love. One can perhaps see his situation running parallel to Robert’s. Apparently, Robert dreads turning into a similarly reserved and isolated person.

In his letter, he hastily dismisses the topic of the lieutenant and returns to his plans for the voyage. His determination becomes evident as he does not let loneliness hinder his sole purpose (his voyage), which he claims to be “as fixed as fate.” He is obviously a responsible leader since the safety of his employees is a priority for him.

He promises he “shall kill no albatross,” a reference Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” in which the killing of an albatross has dire consequences. It is highly appropriate that this famous poem is one of the sources of Robert’s passion for the sea. One can even identify Robert with the ancient mariner, who started out like any other inexperienced sailor, but ended up a wiser man, due to his curiosity about mysterious things.

It is worth noting that Robert always concludes his letters on a depressing note. He is never completely optimistic about returning from his voyages successfully. At the same time, however, he is practical enough to understand that his death is a distinct possibility. He is probably preparing his sister for it.

Letter 3

Summary

This is quite a short letter compared to the earlier two. The letter is written in July, four months after the second one, and reaches his sister through a merchant who is bound homeward from Archangel.

He talks of his crew being highly resolute; they do not let minor dangers, like floating sheets of ice, deter them. They are in the middle of summer now and have not encountered anything really dangerous, except for a few stiff gales and a springing leak.

This time he ends on a more optimistic note about success crowning his efforts. He believes that they deserve it, after all.

Notes

By now the reader sees that Robert has been in fairly constant touch with his sister, as the third letter is sent four months after the second. He begins on a sad note about not being able to see his native land, now that he is miles away from his hometown.

He is certainly proud of his men who go forth on the voyage, undeterred by the dangers they encounter. Robert says nothing about his own insecurity or uncertainty regarding the voyage. Instead, he talks about being in the middle of summer and encountering unexpected warmth. This could represent a greater intimacy with his crew.

His constant assurances to his sister about his remaining cool and rational seem to be more like a consolation to himself. He now feels burdened with responsibility as they are nearing their destination.

For once, he seems more optimistic about the success of his endeavors. However, he could be merely consoling himself again. But he firmly believes he deserves the success. The last few lines of the letter make the reader wonder if he had ever contemplated abandoning the voyage.

Letter 4

Summary

This last letter of the series starts off with Robert bursting with excitement because he has a tale to report. He has met a young man on their voyage when their ship became stranded in ice. He first relates that one day he had seen a gigantic man on a sled driven by dogs. And then later he had encountered another man, very worn down by fatigue, who had to be persuaded to enter the vessel rather than die outside in the cold.

This stranger is tended to with brandy, soup and loving care. Eventually, he is restored to health. The stranger is quite anxious to know more about Robert. Robert unhesitatingly describes his future plans. This prompts the former to tell the captain his own story. Robert is quite thrilled at gaining first-hand knowledge in this manner.

Robert is curious about what the stranger is doing in such an isolated place. He replies that he is seeking that which has run away from him. Robert immediately remarks that he saw an abnormally large human the other day. The stranger responds to this with a number of questions about the same creature.

Robert tells his sister that he is quite impressed by this stranger, who is so unlike other people. His enthusiasm about nature is what Robert finds highly admirable. He describes him as a “celestial spirit, with a halo around him, within whose circle no grief or folly ventures.” He makes note of the fact that the stranger is suffering because of an unknown cause. He defends himself for becoming highly excited at the prospect of making “friends” with the stranger by declaring that even his sister, who is apparently quite reserved in her judgments of people, would marvel at a person like him.

Robert makes up his mind to take down notes on the stranger’s story. He also promises to keep Margaret informed.

Notes

This letter stands out in the whole series due to its content and shift in mood. While the first three letters have shades of sadness, pessimism and uncertainty, this letter is a solid narration of Robert’s encounter with a stranger and his reaction to it. The reader sees Robert extremely excited about the stranger’s unexpected entry into his life. He almost believes he has found the friend that he has longed for. It is quite surprising that the nearly frozen stranger asks Robert where he is heading before he even steps into the vessel. The author goes into great detail about the stranger’s health, mental as well as physical, and his appearance.

Robert is very impressed by the stranger’s habits, particularly his love of nature. It is as if the stranger is enjoying the spectacular sights of starry skies and seas for the first or the last time. In any case, the stranger seeks solace in nature. Robert instantly makes a few observations about the stranger and some penetrating insights into his character. For instance, he notices the stranger’s never-failing powers of judgment and his remarkable ability to express himself.

The stranger reveals an equal interest in Robert. On learning his plans, he tries to dissuade him from pursuing them, since Robert is willing to pay any price in order to see his goals achieved. One can observe a striking similarity between the present Robert and what the stranger (Victor Frankenstein) used to be. The stranger now takes it upon himself to act as Robert’s friend, philosopher and guide, in order to stop him from heading down the wrong path, a path which he himself had chosen once upon a time.

As the reader will learn later, the stranger's curiosity over the abnormal creature is born of the fact that he himself is the monster's creator and is therefore naturally concerned about him. One may note that while Robert has begun life full of enthusiasm, he now meets a similarly inclined person, who has wearied of all this curiosity and is "a sadder man," like the hero of Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner."

This last letter completes the outer framework of the narrative and what follows is the actual story of the novel.

CHAPTER 1

Summary

The actual tale of Victor Frankenstein, whom the reader first encountered as the stranger, begins here. He was born in Geneva and hails from a family of high repute. His father was married late in life.

The episode dealing with his father's marriage is explained at length. Beaufort, a friend of his father's, fell into unfortunate circumstances and left the town with his daughter since he did not want to live a life of humiliating poverty. Victor's father searched for him and even offered to help, but in vain. When her father became ill, Beaufort's daughter, Caroline, tried her best to make ends meet. But her father eventually died, leaving her an orphan. Victor's father took her under his wing and later married her.

Although there is a considerable age difference between the two, they live a happy life and spend time in Italy, Germany and France. Victor (the narrator), their oldest child, accompanies them everywhere. Caroline longs to have a daughter, and by some quirk of fate, they come across a beautiful girl from a poor family on one of their regular rounds in the slums. They are in Milan at the time. Caroline later visits the family again and decides to adopt the girl. Victor's father is in favor of the idea, as he is always eager to please his wife in every way. The father of this girl was an Italian soldier, who died during the war. The girl grows up in a foster family until she is adopted by Victor and Caroline.

Victor's family is complete when he receives a playmate in Elizabeth, his "more than sister," whom he loves, protects and cherishes until death.

Notes

The friendship between Victor's father and Beaufort, as well as that between Victor and Elizabeth, is significant. The impulse toward friendship is an underlying Romantic theme which the reader has already seen in the intimate bond developing between Robert and Victor. Even the sub-human monster, as will be seen in later chapters, makes efforts to befriend a family.

Details about Victor's parentage are presented. In this way, the chapter presents a neat beginning of a life story. It is interesting to note that the age difference between Victor's parents never hampers their relationship. This shows how much they actually need each other. Victor, senior would do anything to keep Caroline happy after what she has been through. The author chooses to focus on the father's love for Caroline and says little about her love for him.

The benevolence of the couple is proven by their customary visits to poor families and by their adoption of a child who is a complete stranger. But the physical appearance of the child, Elizabeth, who is fair, blond and blue-eyed, suggests that she possesses a "northern" beauty, although she is found in Italy. Such unusual juxtapositions are common in Romantic literature.

Victor relates how he looks upon Elizabeth as his own to protect and to cherish. It is interesting to note the ambiguity with which the author describes this relationship between siblings, as Elizabeth is "more than sister" to Victor.

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Victor Frankenstein - He is a young scientist, thirsty for knowledge. He studies the forbidden sciences, questions the principle of life and gives birth to an “inhuman” creature. In this venture, he overreaches himself. He gathers tremendous knowledge, defies his parents and dabbles in the supernatural. He shows a natural human tendency to pursue the forbidden. But his knowledge nevertheless leaves him.....

Elizabeth Lavenza - The kind, gentle female who is “more than sister” to Victor and “more than daughter” to his father marries Victor. Her devotion to Victor is total and undying. Elizabeth’s love for Victor rivals the love of Caroline for Alphonse. In this case it is Elizabeth’s love which gains prominence, and not Victor’s.

Elizabeth has never complained of the ambiguity of their relationship. She has totally.....

Henry Clerval - He is a devoted friend to Victor. He is like a savior, coming at the right time to rescue Victor from the brink of destruction. He wants to be with him so that they can study.....

The “Monster” - He is the nameless creature who is the product of Victor’s ambition, curiosity, and forbidden knowledge. He remains anonymous until the end of the novel. It is ironic that one has to refer to him as a “monster” or a “demon” when he starts out as more humane than many of.....

Robert Walton - The sea captain can be said to be an extension of Victor’s personality. He is rather passionate about voyages and discoveries, and he will go to any extent to attain his goals. His purpose is commendable, but not the means he employs to.....

Additional characters are analyzed in the complete study guide

AUTHORS STYLE

Frankenstein as a gothic novel - The gothic tradition highlights the grotesque, relies on mysterious and remote settings, and is intended to evoke fear. All of these qualities are evident in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The “monster” around whom the novel revolves is itself a product of Victor Frankenstein’s attraction to the grotesque, which results in deformity and deviation. The monster towers over other.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The author has taken great care in structuring this novel. It starts with letters from the sea captain, Robert, to his sister, Margaret (Mrs. Saville). The story of Frankenstein, as well as that of the monster, is covered in his letters. In other words, Robert meets Victor, who then tells his story. Victor meets the monster, who also tells a story, and finally, the novel concludes with another set of Robert’s letters. The plot is presented in a structure of concentric circles, with Robert in the outermost circle, Victor in the second circle, and the.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Main Theme

Mary Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein*, gains increasing significance in the modern world with its relevant theme of “man playing God.” Creation lies in the hands of God/Nature, but man tries to interfere in this process.

Shelley shows Frankenstein, the young scientist, questioning the principle of life: “Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed?” Frankenstein is an idealist who believes in his goals and will go to any lengths to achieve them. “It was a bold question, and one which has ever been considered as a mystery, yet with how many things are we upon the brink of becoming acquainted, if cowardice or carelessness did not restrain our enquiry.” His intention is to rid the world of death, to “renew life.....

Additional themes are analyzed in the complete study guide

QUOTATIONS - QUOTES RELATED TO THEMES

Theme - Guilt/Regret

Pg. 24 "I regret that I am taken from you; and happy and beloved as I have been, it is not hard to guilt you all..."

Pg. 53 "A thousand times rather would I have confessed to render her happy life, now all was to be obliterated..., and I the cause!"- Victor Frankenstein.

Pg. 58 "I did confess, but I confessed a lie... but now the falsehood lies heavier at my heart than all my other sins."- Justine

Pg. 60 "From the tortures of my heart, I turned to contemplate the grief of Elizabeth"- Victor

Pg. 61 "Justine died; she rested; I was alive.

The blood flowed freely through my veins, but a weight of despair and remorse pressed on my heart, which nothing could remove it."-Victor

Pg. 70 "Cursed (although i curse myself) be the hands that formed you!"- Victor talking to the monster

Pg. 85 "Oh that I had forever remained in my native wood, nor known nor felt beyond the sensation of hunger, thirst, and heat."

Pg. 89 "His blind and aged father and is gentle sister lay in a noisome dungeon while he[Felix] enjoyed the free air and the safety of her whom he loved."

Theme - Responsibility of Parents/Parental Duties

Pg. 32 "My children....my firmest hopes of future happiness were place on the prospect of your union."

Pg. 33 "I know that while you are pleased with yourself, you will think of us with affection, and we shall hear regularly from you."

Pg. 40 "You will find a happy, cheerful home, and friends who love you clearly."

Pg. 87 " The young girl spoke in high and enthusiastic terms of.....

STUDY QUESTIONS - BOOK REPORT / ESSAY TOPICS

1. Show the ambiguity of the Victor-Elizabeth relationship.
2. The three major women characters in the novel are Caroline, Elizabeth and Justine. Are they similar to each other? Can they be called women who were typical of their age?
3. How does Nature (and natural surroundings) function in the novel?.....

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