Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Frankenstein

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Plot

- The story is framed by Captain Robert Walton's letters to his sister during a voyage to the Arctic, where he rescues Victor Frankenstein.
- Victor, from Geneva, studies science at Ingolstadt and discovers how to give life to dead matter. He builds a creature, but is horrified by it and runs away.
- The creature is rejected by everyone. Victor's young brother William is murdered, and the servant Justine is wrongly executed for the crime.
- The creature tells his story: he learned to speak and read by secretly watching the De Lacey family, but they drove him away. Lonely and rejected, he turned to revenge. He asks Victor to make him a female companion.
- Victor starts the female, then destroys her. The creature kills Victor's friend Henry Clerval, then Victor's wife Elizabeth on their wedding night. Victor chases the creature to the Arctic and dies on Walton's ship. The creature mourns him and says he will end his own life.

Themes

- Dangerous knowledge and ambition, creation and responsibility, isolation and loneliness, **nature and nurture**, revenge, and the power of nature.

Context

- Mary Shelley began the novel in 1816, during a ghost-story contest at Lake Geneva, and published it in 1818. Its subtitle, 'The Modern **Prometheus**', refers to the myth of **Prometheus**, punished for giving fire to humans.
- It reflects **Romanticism** (the power of nature and emotion, and a warning against cold reason) and new science such as **galvanism**, using electricity to make dead muscles twitch.

- Mary Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was a famous writer on women's rights who died soon after Mary was born.

Key quotations

- 'I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created' and 'Learn from me... how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge' (Victor).
- 'I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel' and 'I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend' (the creature).
- 'Beware; for I am fearless, and therefore powerful' and 'I shall be with you on your wedding-night' (the creature).

How to get top marks

- Ask who the real monster is. Shelley gives the creature a thoughtful, moving voice, while Victor abandons what he made.
- Use the nested narrative: Walton, Victor and the creature each tell the story, so we weigh up several sides.
- Link Victor's ambition to Shelley's warning about science and responsibility, with Romantic ideas about nature.

Key terms

Frame narrative	A story told within another story.
Gothic	A style of fiction with horror, mystery and extreme emotions.
Romanticism	A movement that valued nature, emotion and imagination.
Galvanism	Using electricity to make muscles move.
Prometheus	In Greek myth, a figure punished for giving fire to humans.
Epistolary	Told through letters.
Nature and nurture	The debate over whether character comes from birth or upbringing.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Who narrates the frame story of Frankenstein?
2. Where does Victor study science?
3. How does Victor react when the creature comes to life?
4. Who is wrongly executed for William's murder?
5. How does the creature learn to speak and read?
6. What does the creature ask Victor to make?

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7. Whom does the creature kill on Victor's wedding night?
8. What does 'The Modern Prometheus' refer to?

Answers

1. Captain Robert Walton
2. Ingolstadt
3. He is horrified and runs away
4. Justine
5. By secretly watching the De Lacey family
6. A female companion
7. Elizabeth
8. A myth about a figure punished for giving fire to humans

What to do next

Practise 12 questions on this topic

Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

Free revision for GCSE and KS3 at lycolearn.co.uk. Some notes are for one exam board only, and say so in brackets.

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