Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Mary Shelley's emphasis on the Faust legend, or the quest to conquer the unknown at the cost of one's humanity, forms a central theme of the novel. The reader continually sees Victor favor his ambition above his friendships and family. Created by a German writer named Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the Faust myth suggested that the superior individual could throw off the shackles of traditional conventions and alienate himself from society. English Romantic poets, who assumed the status of poet-prophets, believed that only in solitude could they produce great poetry. In Frankenstein, however, isolation only leads to despair. Readers get the distinct feeling that Victor's inquisitive nature causes his emotional and physical peril because he cannot balance his intellectual and social interactions. For instance, when he leaves home to attend the University of Ingolstadt, he immerses himself in his experiment and forgets about the family who lovingly supported him throughout his childhood. Victor actually does not see his family or correspond with them for six years, even when his father and Elizabeth try to keep in touch with him by letters. Shelley's lengthy description of Victor's model parents contrasts with his obsessive drive to create the creature.

Margaret's correspondence with Walton at the beginning of the novel also compares with Shelley's description of Victor's home life; both men were surrounded by caring, nurturing individuals who considered the welfare of their loved ones at all times. Not surprisingly, Walton's ambition to conquer the unknown moves him, like it does Victor, further away from civilization and closer to feelings of isolation and depression. The creature, too, begins reading novels such as Goethe's The Sorrows of Werter and John Milton's Paradise Lost, claiming that an "increase of knowledge only [showed] what a wretched outcast I was." For the creature, an increase in knowledge only brings sorrow and discontent. Victor and Walton ultimately arrive at these two states because of their inquisitive natures.

Nature Vs. Nurture

The theme of nurturing, or how environment contributes to a person's character, truly fills the novel. With every turn of the page, another nurturing example contrasts with Victor's lack of a parental role with his "child," the creature. Caroline nurtures Elizabeth back to health and loses her own life as a result. Clerval nurtures Victor through his illness when he is in desperate need of a caretaker after the creature is brought to life. The De Lacey's nurturing home becomes a model for the creature, as he begins to return their love in ways the family cannot even comprehend. For instance, the creature stopped stealing the De Lacey's food after realizing their poverty. In sympathy, he left firewood for the family to reduce Felix's chores. Each nurturing act contrasts strongly with Victor's gross neglect of the creature's needs. And by showing the affection between Caroline Frankenstein and her adopted daughters Elizabeth and Justine, Shelley suggests that a child need not have biological ties to a parent to deserve an abundance of love and attention.
Appearances and Reality

Victor's inquisitive probing causes him to delve beneath the appearances of "acceptable" science and create an animate being from inanimate materials. Nevertheless, he forgets to extend this inquiring sensibility toward his creature. The creature's physical appearance prompts Victor to flee from his creation; Victor never takes the time to search beneath the creature's ugliness to discover the very human qualities that the creature possesses. While Victor easily manipulates nature and natural laws to suit his own intellectual interests, he lacks an understanding of human nature, as proven throughout the novel.

In addition to the importance of the creature's appearance, Shelley emphasizes the magnificent landscape throughout the novel. This demonstrates her loyalty to the Romantic movement of her time, which often glorified nature. Although Victor often turns to nature to relieve his despondent thoughts, Clerval notices the intimate interaction between nature and humans in Switzerland. He says to Victor, "Look at that group of labourers coming from among their vines; and that village halfhid in the recess of the mountain." Clerval looks beyond nature's surface appearance, drawing Victor's attention to the harmonious interaction between nature and a productive society. Victor praises his friend as having a "wild and enthusiastic imagination [which] was chastened by the sensibility of his heart," a sensibility Victor ironically lacks. In the isolated Arctic, when Walton's ship is trapped by mountains of ice, he respects nature's resistance to his exploration and eventually leaves the untamed region. Like Clerval, Walton experiences life by interacting harmoniously with nature and people, as he proves when he honors his crew members' request to return home.

Duty and Responsibility

Victor's inability to know his creature relates directly to his lack of responsibility for the creature's welfare or the creature's actions. The role of responsibility or duty takes many shapes throughout the story, but familial obligations represent one of the novel's central themes. Whether Caroline nurses Elizabeth or Felix blames himself for his family's impoverished condition, Victor's dismissal of his parental duties makes readers empathize with the creature. Victor only feels a sense of duty after the creature says the famous line, "How dare you sport thus with life? Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind." The creature compares himself to Adam — thus comparing Victor to God — and claims that Victor owes him a certain amount of happiness. Even though the creature temporarily convinces Victor to grant him his rights, Victor never really learns the virtues of parental or ethical responsibility.

Justice Vs. Injustice

By showing how Victor ignores his responsibilities while those around him do not, Shelley invites the reader to judge his character. Themes of justice and injustice play a large role in the novel, as the author develops issues of fairness and blame. Usually those characters who take responsibility for others and for their own actions are considered fair and just. For example, Elizabeth pleads Justine's case in court after Justine is accused of William's murder. Victor knows the creature committed the crime, yet he does not — or cannot — reveal the creature's wrongdoing.
However, the most important aspect of the trial is Justine's confession. Elizabeth claims, "I believed you guiltless until I heard that you had yourself declared your guilt." When Justine explains that she confessed after being found guilty because that was the only way to receive absolution from the church, Elizabeth accepts her at her word and tells her, "I will proclaim, I will prove your innocence." Making confessions, listening to others, and offering verbal promises all signal the highest truths in this novel. Elizabeth accepts Justine's guilt only if Justine says she is guilty; never mind the facts or evidence, never mind intuition — words reveal true belief. Except for Victor, every character listens to others: Mr. Kirwin listens to Victor's story, the creature listens to the De Lacey family, Felix listens to Safie's father, Margaret listens to Walton, and Walton listens to Victor and to his crew. Listening helps all of these characters distinguish fair from unfair. Victor's refusal to listen impartially to his creature says much about his character. Shelley suggests that Victor not only played God when he created the creature; he also unfairly played the role of judge and accuser.