

Cultural Context: Frankenstein (1831)

Context and Overview

Written during the early 19th century, Frankenstein reflects the Romantic era's fascination with science, nature, and the limits of human ambition. Shelley's novel examines the cultural anxieties of the time, particularly around the rapid advancement of science, the isolation of individuals from traditional social structures, and the consequences of defying natural boundaries. Shelley's narrative critiques the unchecked pursuit of knowledge and explores the impact of scientific ambition on human relationships and society. The cultural context of Frankenstein exposes the dangers of overstepping moral and social boundaries, warning against the consequences of a society obsessed with progress.

Scientific Ambition and the Fear of Overreach

In Frankenstein, Shelley critiques the cultural obsession with scientific advancement, questioning the moral and ethical implications of unchecked ambition. Victor Frankenstein's quest to conquer death and create life reflects the era's fascination with scientific discovery and its potential to disrupt social norms.

- **Example and Quote**

Victor's motivation is clear as he proclaims, "Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world." (Chapter 4). His desire to "break through" the boundaries of life and death reflects his ambition to transcend natural limitations.

- **Analysis**

Victor's ambition represents the era's belief that science could solve all human problems, yet Shelley critiques this perspective by illustrating the consequences of disregarding ethical boundaries. In the cultural context of the Romantic era, there was both admiration for scientific progress and fear of its potential dangers. Shelley uses Victor's story to question whether humanity has the right to "play God" and manipulate life itself, warning against a society that sacrifices morality for innovation.

Isolation and Alienation in a Changing Society

The theme of isolation is central to Frankenstein, with Victor and the Creature both experiencing profound loneliness. Victor's isolation results from his relentless pursuit of scientific knowledge, while the Creature is alienated due to his appearance and society's rejection.

- **Example and Quote**

Victor acknowledges the toll of his isolation, saying, "I shunned my fellow creatures as if I had been guilty of a crime." (Chapter 4). His sense of guilt and withdrawal from society reveal the psychological costs of his ambition.

- **Analysis**

Victor's self-imposed isolation reflects the Romantic era's concern with individualism and the alienating effects of intellectual pursuits. Shelley critiques the era's emphasis on personal achievement, suggesting that a society focused solely on individual ambition leads to isolation and despair. The Creature's forced isolation further

emphasises this critique, showing the consequences of societal rejection for those who do not conform to accepted norms.

Family Relationships and Social Obligations

Shelley presents family as a stabilising force, contrasting Victor's loving family with his rejection of his "creation." The cultural emphasis on family and responsibility in the 19th century heightens the tragedy of Victor's abandonment of the Creature, revealing the consequences of neglecting one's social and familial duties.

- **Example and Quote**

Victor's decision to abandon the Creature immediately after giving it life reveals his disregard for the responsibilities he has created: "Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room." (Chapter 5). His horror and rejection show his lack of accountability.

- **Analysis**

In the cultural context of the time, family was seen as central to one's moral and social duties. By neglecting the Creature, Victor fails not only as a creator but as a "father" figure, leading to disastrous consequences. Shelley critiques a society that values achievement over human connection, demonstrating that neglect of family responsibilities can result in alienation and, ultimately, violence. The Creature's destructive actions reflect his resentment at being denied the basic social support that family should provide.

Social Judgement and the Value of Appearance

The novel explores the role of appearance in social acceptance, showing how society judges individuals based on outward appearance rather than inner qualities. The Creature, despite his intelligence and sensitivity, is rejected due to his frightening appearance, symbolising society's superficial judgments.

- **Example and Quote**

The Creature describes his plight: "I am malicious because I am miserable; am I not shunned and hated by all mankind?" (Chapter 16). His anger stems from his rejection by society, which refuses to see him as anything more than a monster.

- **Analysis**

The Creature's rejection reflects the 19th-century societal value placed on physical appearance and conformity. Shelley critiques a superficial society that ostracises those who do not fit conventional standards, suggesting that such judgments lead to resentment and violence. This cultural context resonates with Romantic ideals, which valued individual worth over societal expectations. Shelley's portrayal of the Creature encourages readers to question their own biases and consider the impact of prejudice on those who are marginalised.

The Consequences of Defying Natural Boundaries

Frankenstein underscores the dangers of tampering with nature and defying its laws, a theme reflective of Romanticism's reverence for the natural world. Victor's attempt to manipulate life itself leads to disastrous consequences, emphasising the importance of respecting natural boundaries.

- **Example and Quote**

Reflecting on his actions, Victor warns against excessive ambition: “Learn from me... how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world.” (Chapter 4). His words convey his regret and the cautionary lesson of his story.

- **Analysis**

Victor’s reflection embodies the Romantic belief in the sanctity of nature and the dangers of human overreach. Shelley warns against the desire to control or alter natural processes, suggesting that such actions disrupt the natural order and lead to unforeseen consequences. By positioning Victor’s downfall as a result of defying nature, Shelley critiques a cultural fascination with conquering the unknown, reinforcing the Romantic value of humility before the natural world.

Conclusion

The cultural context of *Frankenstein* is defined by themes of scientific ambition, isolation, social expectations, and the consequences of challenging natural boundaries. Mary Shelley uses the character of Victor Frankenstein and his creation to critique the Romantic era’s complex relationship with science and individualism, warning against the consequences of forsaking family and societal duties in pursuit of personal ambition. Through her exploration of social judgment, family responsibilities, and the dangers of defying nature, Shelley creates a cautionary tale about the human cost of unchecked progress. *Frankenstein* ultimately serves as a powerful reminder of the need for balance between innovation and ethical responsibility.