

MUSIC: [BBC Sounds intro music plays]

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MUSIC: [organ music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Hi and welcome to our Bitesize English Literature podcast. My name is Hollie McNish, I'm a writer and a poet, and in this series I'm going to take you through the texts for your GCSE English Literature and help you prepare for your exam. This series is all about Mary Shelley's Gothic novel "Frankenstein" and over the next seven episodes we're going to focus on the key themes: knowledge, isolation, prejudice, justice, ambition, and nature verses nurture.

But before we get into it, in this episode we're gonna talk about the plot, introduce you to the main characters, and find out a bit about the author and the time she was writing.

MUSIC: [Gothic music ends]

HOLLIE McNISH: Helping me with this series is the incredible writer Steven Camden. He writes novels and he also performs poetry under the name Polarbear.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Hi.

HOLLIE McNISH: Steven, kick us off. Why don't you tell me what you think is the most interesting thing about the novel "Frankenstein".

STEVEN CAMDEN: For me it's the fact that Mary Shelley raises so many interesting questions by the themes without giving you definite answers. [HOLLIE: Oh, nice.]

So just when you think you're like, oh yeah, I know it all, there's always another side to the story. You know?

HOLLIE McNISH: That's true! Yeah! [STEVEN: Yeah.] That's true.

STEVEN CAMDEN: It feels real.

HOLLIE McNISH: Well, we're gonna talk about the plot in a bit more detail, but first let's set the scene. "Frankenstein" is about a man who creates life but it goes really wrong. We're gonna hear a

section from the text where Victor Frankenstein, the scientist, is telling his story to the explorer Robert Walton. He's explaining how obsessed he was with creating life. So, listen to the words he uses, and it might be handy to have a pen so you can write down any of the most important or interesting words you hear.

CLIP

VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN: Every night I was possessed of a slow fever, and I became nervous to a most painful degree: the fall of a leaf startled me and I <panting> shunned my fellow creatures as if I'd been guilty of a crime.

Sometimes I grew alarmed at the wreck I perceived that I had become. The energy of my purpose alone sustained me.

Eventually on a dreary night in November, I beheld the accomplishment of my toils.

END OF CLIP

HOLLIE McNISH: A very dramatic clip.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: He calls himself a "wreck".

STEVEN CAMDEN: He calls himself a "wreck". His life is in pieces. He has hit the rocks and it's not gone well for him at all.

HOLLIE McNISH: It's not gone well. And remember the setting; like, "wreck" is a good word here, isn't it? [STEVEN: Mm-hmm.] 'Cause, "wreck", there's this idea of shipwreck, and he's a wreck. Erm, and then this quote: "shunned my fellow creatures." So could you explain to us what "shunned" is and what that-, what that's about?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Well, "shunned" is-, "shunned" is pushing people away, right? So "shunned" is, like, kind of separating yourself and not wanting anyone else around you at all. [HOLLIE: Yeah.]

And that's what it drove him to: it drove him to isolate himself by literally pushing everyone away.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: First, the really important thing that you need to remember about the novel "Frankenstein" is that Frankenstein, Victor Frankenstein, is the name of the scientist; the creature is unnamed. [STEVEN: No.] The creature is not called Frankenstein! [STEVEN: Nope!] Frankenstein is the scientist.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: So we're going to briefly go over the plot because a lot happens in this text. It begins at the North Pole, where the explorer, Robert Walton, and his crew come across Victor Frankenstein. Now, Victor Frankenstein is in pretty bad shape and he tells Robert Walton this story.

We find out about Victor's childhood. He's from Geneva in Switzerland. He has a happy family, from what we hear, and from a young age he's obsessed with science. He goes to university and he starts secretly trying to create life in a very ambitious search for knowledge and glory.

STEVEN CAMDEN: He steals body parts and electrocutes them. [HOLLIE: Lovely.] But as soon as he succeeds in bringing this thing to life, the creature he's made, he finds it hideous and he runs away.

The creature is alone. Right? It stumbles off. It comes across some villagers; they also react in horror when they see him, so he learns to hide.

He comes across a family, the DeLaceys. He watches them, and through them he learns to talk. But when he approaches them for help they attack him and he has to run away. He searches for his creator Victor Frankenstein and finds Frankenstein's younger brother William. He murders William and frames Justine, a servant and family friend, for the crime. Justine is found guilty and sentenced to death.

The creature begs Victor Frankenstein to make him a companion. And at first Victor agrees, travelling across Europe to complete his task, but he changes his mind and destroys the unfinished new creature, and the original creature takes revenge, first murdering Frankenstein's best friend Henry Clerval, then his wife Elizabeth on their wedding night. Finally Frankenstein is driven to hunt the creature across the Arctic, and this is how he meets Robert Walton, the explorer.

Frankenstein falls ill and dies. The creature sees that Victor has died and promises to end his own life, walking off into the snowy abyss.

MUSIC: [Gothic music chord]

HOLLIE McNISH: Okay, let's look in a bit more detail at the main characters. So, we've got Victor Frankenstein. He's a scientist. Remember that; he's the scientist! We'll say it again in a lot of the other podcasts! He's the creator of the creature. He's in search of glory. He's obsessed with creating life but never quite admits to the mistakes he's made while pursuing this ambition.

One question about this character is: who is the real monster? Is it Victor Frankenstein or is it the creature he gives life to? Both refer to themselves as monsters throughout. [STEVEN: Mm-hmm.]

Then we've got the—

STEVEN CAMDEN: Creature.

HOLLIE McNISH: Creature.

STEVEN CAMDEN: The creature is abandoned the moment he's born, shunned by everyone; everyone rejects him. He's really clever. He teaches himself language. He finds books and learns to read. And then through the process of being shunned by everyone he becomes vengeful. And deciding to take revenge, he murders Frankenstein's brother, best friend, and wife.

He's completely alone. After he's killed Frankenstein's brother William he tries to bargain with Frankenstein and begs to have a companion so he isn't lonely. And he ends up saying he'll take his own life after Frankenstein dies.

HOLLIE McNISH: And walks off.

STEVEN CAMDEN: And walks off into the ice.

HOLLIE McNISH: Elizabeth Lavenza. So Elizabeth is one of two female characters. And we'll chat about why that's important a little bit later on, especially in the episode on Ambition. So Elizabeth is adopted by the Frankenstein family. She marries Victor Frankenstein but is murdered on their wedding night by the creature.

She's always described as good and kind and – and perfect; she's-, she's one of these idealised female characters.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah. William Frankenstein, Victor Frankenstein's younger, beloved little brother, a child who encounters the creature, calls the creature an ogre, and is then murdered by him.

HOLLIE McNISH: Justine Moritz. So Justine is a servant but is also described as a friend of the Frankenstein family by Victor Frankenstein. She's framed for the murder of Frankenstein's little brother William and ends up falsely confessing to the murder out of fear. She's sentenced to death, and she is a great character to look at in terms of the themes of justice and also prejudice.

Robert Walton.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Robert Walton, he is the explorer who starts the story: he's writing letters home to his sister, and he encounters Frankenstein in the North Pole. Frankenstein tells him the whole story too. He's kind of a mirror to Victor Frankenstein in many ways; he's also on a quest for glory, but thankfully he kinda learns the lesson that Victor didn't learn after hearing what Victor has to say.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: So that's the plot and the characters. It's also important to know a little bit about the context. So, who was the author, who was Mary Shelley, and what was happening when the book was written?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Okay, Mary Shelley was only 18 when she started writing, and the novel was published in 1818. [HOLLIE: Perfect!] Perfect, right?! [HOLLIE: Yeah!]

Right, "Frankenstein" is a Gothic novel. So, Gothic novels use ideas about the supernatural to explore what it means to be human. Isolation is a really frequent theme of the Gothic novel, so make sure you get "Gothic novel" – mention the "Gothic novel" when you write an exam in terms of the time and the context.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah, and if you go to the Bitesize website then you can find more information about terms such as "Gothic novel". [STEVEN: Mm-hmm.]

Er, the story is told in letters. [STEVEN: Yeah.] So this is also often a feature of Gothic novels.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Like the setting is.

HOLLIE McNISH: The setting [STEVEN: Yeah.] is typical of Gothic novels.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Mountains; ice floes; big, lonely, dangerous, intimidating, scary places which fit in with the kind of tradition of Gothic novels and fit perfectly for this story.

HOLLIE McNISH: So have a little break. Close your eyes. Imagine the setting: Gothic novel. Imagine these big – as you say: lonely; dangerous; ice – ooh, cold.

STEVEN CAMDEN: You're on the ice. Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: As well as a Gothic novel, "Frankenstein" is often seen as the first science fiction novel. So Mary Shelley took the Gothic tropes, the Gothic ideas, things that people were used to in Gothic novels, and gave them a new spin.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah. And it's set at the end of the 18th century, so we're coming – this is the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution now, which is also a really good term for your exam. The Industrial Revolution, a time of massive change in terms of, erm, machinery, business – science, really. And so you've got all these possible questions and fears and insecurities flying around as well at the time, which all feed into what makes a story so powerful.

HOLLIE McNISH: And one of the things specifically scientists were talking about at this time was whether it was possible to bring the dead back to life, experimenting on animals to test their theories, which is–

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah, using electricity, right, to, like, charge 'em... ah, man.(?)

HOLLIE McNISH: Using electricity. And there is more about the Gothic novel and more about the Industrial Revolution all on the Bitesize website, so go and have a look at that.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Right, Polarbear, a very quick plot recap. Go.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Victor Frankenstein, ambitious scientist, starts messing around with body parts, creates a creature, is terrified of it, runs off. Creature staggers off, teaches itself how to read and how humans work to teach it how to speak; wants to kind of make contact with people and is completely shunned [HOLLIE: Yeah.] and abused by e-, e-, at every turn.

HOLLIE McNISH: By who? Any example?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Vill-, villagers; er, the DeLacey family, which he watches and learns from. Erm, tries to make contact. Meets Victor Frankenstein, his creator's younger brother. Kills the younger brother. Frames Justine, who then gets executed for the murder. The creature asks – begs for a companion from Victor. Victor agrees to make a companion, a female companion, for the creature; changes his mind midway through; destroys it. The creature sees that; in revenge, kills Elizabeth, Victor's wife, on their wedding night. [HOLLIE: Ogh!]

Victor becomes obsessed with tracking the monster down for his own revenge; it takes him all the way to the North Pole, where he encounters Walton who's writing these letters. Victor ultimately dies on Walton's ship and the creature walks off to die alone in the snow.

HOLLIE McNISH: Oopff! One murder missed; who was it?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Oh, his best friend, Henry Clerval.

HOLLIE McNISH: Great. That was brilliant. [laughs] That was great! Excellent plot recap. If I were you I'd go back, I'd listen to that 50 times if you don't remember the plot! That was brilliant. So there's key terms: Gothic novel; it's written in letters; Industrial Revolution. Go have a look on the Bitesize website to find out more about them. If it was me I would try to just remember an introduction which had, like, all of these key themes in it; so something like: Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" is a Gothic novel written in letter form in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution which some say is the first science fiction novel.

MUSIC: [music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Get all those facts into your exams. Thanks so much for listening to this Bitesize English Literature podcast. You can find even more help and advice from the Bitesize team; just search "Bitesize" on BBC Sounds. In the next episode we're going to be talking about the theme of knowledge.

MUSIC: [Gothic music and then organ music plays]

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