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HOLLIE McNISH: Hello and welcome to our Bitesize English Literature podcast. My name is Hollie McNish, I'm a writer and a poet, and across seven episodes I'm gonna talk through the key themes in Mary Shelley's novel "Frankenstein" to help you prepare for your GCSE in English Literature.

If you need a refresher on the plot, go back and listen to Episode 1, where we go through the plot and the characters and the time Shelley was writing. Repetition is really important to help you learn, so it's a good idea to listen to each episode a few times to get the information really locked into your brain.

And helping me get into the world of "Frankenstein" is the amazing writer Steven Camden, who performs under the name Polarbear.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Hello.

HOLLIE McNISH: Hello.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: For the next six episodes we'll talk through the key themes. We'll break it down character by character and give you some quotes to remember. So "Frankenstein" is the story of scientist Victor Frankenstein whose obsessive search for knowledge leads him to create a creature who goes on to destroy Frankenstein's life.

In this episode we're focusing on the theme of Knowledge because it's one of the major themes in "Frankenstein".

Steven, have you ever heard the phrase "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing"?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yep, I have. And it means that if you only know a little bit about something you might get overconfident, right, think you're brilliant, [HOLLIE: Yeah.] think you know everything, and then that leaves you to make a big mistake; like our friend, scientist, Victor Frankenstein.

HOLLIE McNISH: Beware. [laughs] Beware!

We're going to hear a section from the text. The explorer Robert Walton is stuck in ice and has come across Victor Frankenstein who has ventured out into the Arctic.

Walton has explained that he wants to carry on his search for knowledge despite the danger of this quest, and this is Victor Frankenstein trying to warn him that searching for knowledge has ruined his life.

CLIP

VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN: Why do we do these things?

ROBERT WALTON: What things?

VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN: These explorations.

You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been.

END OF CLIP

HOLLIE McNISH: Whoa. The quote—

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: [laughs] The quote from that clip that I...

STEVEN CAMDEN: Go on, do it.

HOLLIE McNISH: ...think is a great one, I will try to do it in almost as dramatic a voice as that. No, I won't.

"You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, <whispers> as mine has been."

STEVEN CAMDEN: You love the alliteration as well, don't you?

HOLLIE McNISH: I love it. Like, I love this. I think it's a good idea, now, to have a pen and paper. To be honest, listening to all these podcasts, I think it's a good idea to always have a pen and paper with you so you can write down the most important words. I do love alliteration. So alliteration is repeating the same letter at the beginning of a word. So "serpent to sting you" has a little bit of alliteration, but a little bit is enough to write about in your exam.

They really, really love it when you discuss language in an exam. It's really important to discuss language in your GCSE English exam. And this quote I think is super for it. So, "a serpent to sting you", these are the important words of this quote for me. And for me it's got a great rhythm, and I would probably say this over and again, "a serpent to sting you, a serpent to sting you, a serpent to sting you." It's kinda like—

STEVEN CAMDEN: Can I have a go? Can I—

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Can I-, can I try say the-, the whole thing? Like—

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah, I love it.

STEVEN CAMDEN: "You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been."

It's a warning, right? It's... it's Frankenstein, who's been through a lot - it's early in the book, but he already has been through so much before that we then learn. [HOLLIE: Yeah.]

And he's-, he's lost everything, and he's trying to warn Robert Walton against behaving like he did – 'cause he's been stung, right? He's been stung!

HOLLIE McNISH: He has! And the language really adds to it. Mary Shelley uses this-, this language specifically here because it is a warning. And the "serpent to sting you" is very visual.

Close your eyes. Imagine the serpent stinging you! Imagine knowledge as this massive serpent. Erm, you can see it. It's a really visual warning from Mary Shelley.

MUSIC: [organ music sounds]

HOLLIE McNISH: So now we're gonna break it down character by character, looking at what they tell us about knowledge, and give you a quote to remember for each. So first up, Victor Frankenstein, the scientist, because he's on a quest for knowledge, isn't he?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah. But there is always mixed in with it this ambition, this glory-seeking of ego, potentially, right? So it's always conflicting, like, what he's really driven by.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah, the motive is really conflicting, isn't it? [STEVEN: Yes.] And Victor goes to university; he's really interested in scientific discovery, and he starts to get really obsessed with creating life. He seems to think it's gonna be a beautiful thing, if you can achieve that; and he starts all these experiments with electricity. But he does it in secret, which is gonna be important in the next episode because we're talking about isolation.

But he is quite sneaky with it. You get the feeling that maybe he knows something might – could go wrong?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Exactly. And also, he's doing it for himself as much as for the greater good.

There are plenty of quotes, and one that I really like is Frankenstein saying, "What glory would attend the discovery?" That word "glory": [HOLLIE: Yeah.] glory is the spotlight; is the fame; is like, yeah, you're not so altruistic and, you know, just generous for the human race, are you?

HOLLIE McNISH: No. And this is before he's created the creature. Yeah, the word "glory" is a big, big word for knowledge, isn't it?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Completely. Essential, I think.

MUSIC: [organ music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: The historical context here is also really important. So, 1818 – [chuckles] remember your 18s! [STEVEN: Mm-hmm.] 1818, when "Frankenstein" was published, it was a time when scientific knowledge and geographical discovery and technological change were being challenged and pushed all the time, called the Industrial Revolution.

You can look on the Bitesize website. There's more information about the Industrial Revolution on there. But it was when things changed really, really quickly.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Really fast, and people were having to adjust, within generations and between generations, to, like, so much new stuff that, yeah, well, it must have been terrifying.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah, terrifying. And the idea that this might come at a social cost. Like, what will happen to humanity?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah. And the responsibility that comes with it, that idea of what you do with that power, who gets to wield that, and what can go wrong.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Okay, so the next character is the creature. He is such a fast learner.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Mm-hmm.

HOLLIE McNISH: He learns language and he learns all about the kind of human ways, human compassion, friendship. He learns a lot of this by watching the DeLaceys.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: And this has been put in – Mary Shelley, remember, the author, has written a tech(?); Mary Shelley has put this family, the DeLaceys, in to show us the creature watching somebody else and learning about the world.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah. He learns about himself in relation to other people as well, right: this idea that he-, when he tries to make contact, before he meets the DeLaceys, he tries to approach villagers and he gets run out of town [HOLLIE: Yeah.] and, like, abused, and they think he's hideous; and he learns – it's almost like he-, that's where he learns he is a creature and he is a different thing.

HOLLIE McNISH: The creature is a really interesting character to look at when we're talking about knowledge because everything he learns is not very positive.

STEVEN CAMDEN: It makes him-, it makes him more alone, right? [HOLLIE: Yeah.] It makes him sadder.

HOLLIE McNISH: This is quite a good character to question what we think Shelley, Mary Shelley, is trying to say about knowledge. What is she saying about knowledge in the context of the creature?  
[STEVEN: Mm-hmm.] Because—

STEVEN CAMDEN: Well, it can make you aware of what you don't have, right? So the-, the more the creature learns the more he s-, he sees what he doesn't have and it makes him kind of sadder.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah.

STEVEN CAMDEN: There's that quote where the creature literally says, "Sorrow only increased with knowledge." So it's like one of those graphs where it's, like, the more I found out the more I realised I don't have, the more alone I feel and the sadder I am.

HOLLIE McNISH: "Sorrow only increased with knowledge." And the more you know about things that you can't have the sadder it can make you. We have that every day. Everyone can relate to that.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Completely. And there's that image of, you know, the-, the water as a mirror: like, when the creature sees itself and puts two and two together; right, because I look like this this is why people don't want anything to do with me.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah. Awful.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Oh, man.

HOLLIE McNISH: It's terrible. [STEVEN: Yeah.] So knowledge and the episode on prejudice, listen to all of the episodes, it's all intertwined, isn't it? And this comes especially when the creature is telling his story. He's watching this family, the DeLaceys, sees himself in the clear pool; 'cause he has this knowledge of judging people's appearances, it makes him feel sad.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yep.

HOLLIE McNISH: And if he didn't have that knowledge he could have looked at himself in the pool and been like, "Cool."

STEVEN CAMDEN: "I'm all right."

MUSIC: [organ music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: The final character we're gonna talk about is the explorer Robert Walton. So he is the person that Victor Frankenstein tells his story to, and he wants to discover the world; he's off exploring in the Arctic. Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein and the creature are the three characters that are really good to compare in terms of the theme of knowledge.

Robert Walton, he personifies this search for geographical knowledge. And at the time the book was written we knew much less about the world, particularly remote places like the North Pole. And the story takes us all around Europe. Victor Frankenstein is from Geneva; he goes to university in Germany; he travels all around the UK as well. And Robert Walton at the start of the story says, "I preferred glory to every enticement that wealth placed in my path."

Basically, he could have had a comfortable life; he was rich, but glory has sent him on this journey. So this is-, is such a good place to start, isn't it?

STEVEN CAMDEN: It's ambition again, yeah, yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: Glory.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Completely. It's the glory of it and wanting more, and wanting to be the person who did it, that put the flag in these things, what drives... humans.

HOLLIE McNISH: And what do you think Mary Shelley – always, always get back to the author – what do you think Mary Shelley is saying about glory? 'Cause it's glory for both of these characters, Walton and Frankenstein.

STEVEN CAMDEN: She's not saying that knowledge, or having-, even having ambition, is a bad thing, but maybe too much of it or the motivations behind it and letting it get out of control is never gonna lead you down a good road, is it?

HOLLIE McNISH: No, it can have disastrous consequences—

STEVEN CAMDEN: Completely.

HOLLIE McNISH: Basically, just be careful.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: [laughs]

MUSIC: [organ music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Okay, so before we finish, let's go through the main points one more time. So, Mary Shelley isn't saying that knowledge is bad, like you said, but they have to balance it against other things, like compassion and responsibility. Victor Frankenstein is on the hunt for undiscovered scientific knowledge. The creature is learning about the world around him and fascinated with the world and languages.

Walton?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Is physically exploring the world, geographically.

HOLLIE McNISH: Is exploring the world. So, quotes again: you need-, you need quotes for your exam!

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah, good one: "Knowledge is a serpent that stings." But you wanna say that 'cause you like the alliteration thing.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah. "Knowledge is a serpent that stings, serpent that stings." So, er, what's your quo—

STEVEN CAMDEN: Well, the creature-, the creature actually saying, "Sorrow only increased with knowledge." So those two things going in hand: the more knowledge the creature gains the more alone and the sadder he feels.

HOLLIE McNISH: Not knowing things can be blissful, [STEVEN: Yeah.] and knowing too much can be terrible! "Sorrow only increased with knowledge." And Frankenstein and Walton are hunting for knowledge, but maybe what they really want is glory. So the word "glory", put it in quote marks.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Exactly, but the truth of glory, [HOLLIE: Yeah.] which is really that sense of, like, you know, the pride of it.

MUSIC: [music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: So, thanks for listening to this Bitesize English Literature podcast. There is more help and advice available from the Bitesize team; just search "Bitesize" on BBC Sounds. In the next episode we're gonna be talking about isolation.



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