

MUSIC: [BBC Sounds intro music plays]

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MUSIC: [organ music plays, then Gothic music]

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 gonna help guide you through the key themes in the novel "Frankenstein" so you're prepared for your GCSE English Literature exam.

There is a lot of information in these podcasts, so if, like me, you're not that good at multitasking, remember you can pause this at any time to make notes or rewind and go back if you miss a bit.

Speaking of multitasking, I'm helped by Steven Camden. He's so busy he's even got two names.

STEVEN CAMDEN: [chuckles]

HOLLIE McNISH: He performs [chuckles] as Polarbear as well as writing novels and poetry.

STEVEN CAMDEN: I-, I'm-, I'm so ambitious. So ambitious.

HOLLIE McNISH: [laughs] He is so ambitious!

STEVEN CAMDEN: [laughs]

HOLLIE McNISH: So the theme for this episode is ambition. We're gonna break it down character by character and make sure you've got some great quotes for your exams.

MUSIC: [timpani drum beats]

HOLLIE McNISH: "Frankenstein" is the story of a really ambitious man, Victor Frankenstein. He's a scientist. He's so ambitious that he wants to create life, but it backfires horribly when he creates what he then thinks of as a monster.

The creature desperately wants to be accepted but ends up turning to murder. And Victor hunts the creature down and they both finally end up in the Arctic.

STEVEN CAMDEN: And one of the things that's most interesting to me about this is like, you know, ambition – it almost sounds like Mary Shelley's saying ambition is a bad thing, which kind of contradicts – you know, we're taught to be ambitious, aim for the-, shoot for the stars, all this kind of thing. And I think it's-, what's so gorgeous about this story is just nothing is as simple as that. It's way-, it's always way more complicated. It's not just ambition but the idea of too much ambition, and what you have to be careful of, and also how your ambition affects other people.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah. And think about the writer as well. Obviously this pers-, this novel is written by someone. It was written by Mary Shelly. She wrote this in 1818, when she was 18. That's pretty ambitious [laughs] for a teenager!

STEVEN CAMDEN: Agreed.

HOLLIE McNISH: Erm, and she wrote it because it was part of a competition. She was at a party. Not having other things to do they set up a competition of who could write the best story. She wrote this as-, as part of a competition at a party. [laughs]

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah. And then it turned out to be one of the most important books ever written, potentially. Like–

HOLLIE McNISH: Amazing! Yeah! Here's a section from the text. This is Victor Frankenstein the scientist telling the explorer Robert Walton all about his, quote, "lofty ambition."

CLIP

VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN: I trod heaven in my thoughts, now exulting in my powers, now burning with the idea of their effects. From my infancy I was imbued with high hopes and a lofty ambition; but how am I sunk! Oh! My friend, if you had known me as I once was you would not recognise me in this state of degradation. Despondency rarely visited my heart; a high destiny seemed to bear me on, until I fell, never, never again to rise.

END OF CLIP

HOLLIE McNISH: Remember, it's a good idea to have a pen and paper with you while you listen to this so you can write down all the most important words and key themes and the quotes.

MUSIC: [organ music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Okay, so the first character we're gonna focus on is Victor Frankenstein. And we've talked about this in another podcast on the theme of knowledge, it's what drives Victor Frankenstein's ambition: glory.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah, a sense of glory. All right, a key quote: "From my infancy I was imbued with high hopes and a lofty ambition." Him being told, erm, like kind of groomed, he was gonna be brilliant, he was gonna do inc-, inc-, tremen-, tremendous things. And that-, that idea of entitlement and that kind of – the wealthy class.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah.

STEVEN CAMDEN: [stutters] Just a phrase, "lofty ambition," like your ambitions are higher than the-, you know, the rest of us in the room, they're above us in the top-, uppermost part of where-, where they can reach to. I've got such flashbacks of teachers telling me that I didn't-, I had unrecognised potential or a-, aim-, aim higher and have-, have loftier ambitions.

HOLLIE McNISH: Oh! Right!

STEVEN CAMDEN: And I'm like, right, no! Because if you do that you end up making a m-, a creature and it all goes wrong.

HOLLIE McNISH: [laughs]

STEVEN CAMDEN: So I was r-, I was right. But I think there's something about that-, the-, the-, the-, the drive behind that ambition that makes him not pay attention to other people or the consequences. It's just, right, I'm going for this. The ego of it. The kind of-, the-, the arrogance of it, almost.

HOLLIE McNISH: And that is a message from Mary Shelley.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Completely, I think.

HOLLIE McNISH: It's quite a-, it's quite a specific message, isn't it?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: Mary Shelley has written this book and she's specifically written about a man with lofty ambitions, or, "From my infancy I was IMBUED with high—" It's like it was like part-, it was pushed into him from infancy, from-, from-, from his childhood, from birth, "From my infancy I was imbued with high hopes" – alliteration, "high hopes" – and the word "lofty", meaning h-, higher.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah. And interesting that from the very same character, Victor, at the end, we get this quote where he-, where he-, his advice to Walton on the ship, he literally says, "Seek happiness in tranquillity and AVOID ambition."

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah, very different!

STEVEN CAMDEN: So there is this sense of – yeah, it's a little bit of a-, a journey Victor's been on! Right?

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah. And these are great quotes to compare. So, "From my infancy I was imbued with high hopes and a lofty ambition." And then, "Seek happiness in tranquilly and avoid ambition." Same character. Really good to remember long quotes in your exams. For this, if I was comparing them, the "lofty ambition" and "avoid ambition", I would s-, snatch those two bits from those quotes, "lofty ambition" at first, "avoid ambition–"

STEVEN CAMDEN: But also, like, him saying, like, saying, "Look, seek happiness in tranquillity," tranquillity being peace and stillness, not this drive, lead the way and go-, kind of go on this quest. Relax, Walton, like, just seek happiness in tranquillity and avoid ambition because it does not end well.

HOLLIE McNISH: Thing is, he says it.

STEVEN CAMDEN: I know. I know. You were gonna-, you were gonna say that!

HOLLIE McNISH: He says it. I mean, it's all very good - "Seek happiness in tranquillity and avoid ambition," but even at the end of this text, in the Arctic, as Walton's crew on the ship are almost begging to go home, they want warm fires, they want-, they want-, they want – everyone wants a hug in this book.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Vic-, Victor can't shake off his old self, can he?

HOLLIE McNISH: He can't. He's-, he's-, he's still telling Robert Walton-, he's still having a go at Robert Walton's men for not wanting to carry on exploring!

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: Does he learn his lesson?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Well, I think—

HOLLIE McNISH: I'm not sure.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Erm, erm, yeah. And I think it's something-, something to-, something that Mary Shelley's potentially saying right here is like, right, it's a very strong force and it's not something you can just kind of drop. "From my infancy I was imbued with high hopes and lofty ambition." If you've been ingrained with it, right, as-, as, you know, the-, the child of a wealthy family, you can't just drop it. And even after all this stuff, that ambition won't fizzle out completely. Really dangerous.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah.

STEVEN CAMDEN: This stuff can be toxic.

HOLLIE McNISH: And think again of the setting.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: The danger of this ambition. You are in the Arctic on a ship! This is-, man, imagine being one of those shipmen! You just want to go home. And there are these TWO, you know, loftily ambitious men [laughs] with lofty ambitions deciding your fate, really.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Right, let's talk about the female characters in this book.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Please.

HOLLIE McNISH: There are not a lot of them.

STEVEN CAMDEN: No.

HOLLIE McNISH: [laughs] Just a couple! But, they do have something to say about ambition. And I feel like there is something missing with the female characters, and I think that is interesting.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Mm-hmm.

HOLLIE McNISH: So, Elizabeth Lavenza is adopted by the Frankenstein family. She's always described as beautiful. Her physical appearance is the most important thing about her. Beauty is always mentioned. And her role in this story is really to support the men. She takes the place of mother when Frankenstein's mother dies, and it's long been the plan that she will marry Victor Frankenstein. Erm—

STEVEN CAMDEN: That's interesting, right, though, that sense of the difference between female ambition and male ambition and what is allowed, and this idea from as a kid – if he says, "From my infancy I was imbued with high hopes and lofty ambition," from when she was a child and came to live with them she was imbued with the notion that she's now gonna m-, for her success, her ambition should extend no further than marrying.

HOLLIE McNISH: She's a-, an idealised female character. She's good and kind and beautiful. And she seems to have no desires of her own except to support the men in their ambitions. But we don't know, we don't know about the female characters' ambitions. And 'cause there's Justine as well, Justine Moritz, who we speak a lot about in the episodes on justice and also prejudice—

STEVEN CAMDEN: —Prejudice, yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: So, does she have ambition? We don't know.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah. It makes a statement in itself indirectly. It's sort of like the fact that these women we don't know as much about them and they aren't the main driving forces says something in itself.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah. It does—

STEVEN CAMDEN: —You know, it's not-, it's not-, it's not-, it's not a story about a woman who made a creature, it's a story about a man who made a creature. And I think that timing and the setting and what a, you know, patriarchal society where men are in charge means and would have meant at that time.

HOLLIE McNISH: And interesting that it's written by a woman.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

MUSIC: [organ music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Let's talk about the creature and ambition.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Right.

HOLLIE McNISH: So there's Robert Walton, there's Victor Frankenstein, there are the two female characters, there's Elizabeth and Justine. What about the creature? Do we think the creature is ambitious?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Well, there is, erm-, there is definitely a-, erm, a-, a drive to learn, right? There is it wanting to be more human and teaching-, teaching himself to read. I mean, it's pretty-, I mean, like, yeah!

HOLLIE McNISH: I think so, yeah!

STEVEN CAMDEN: You know what I mean? Exactly. And I think, is there... But I guess what's interesting, is there-, is there-, is there-, is there a difference between ambition and just kind of wanting something? There's a — a basic need for connection, to my mind, feels different to ambition which is about-, is this idea of lofty ambitions and being above people and kind of going up, where this creature just wants some basic things.

HOLLIE McNISH: Okay.

STEVEN CAMDEN: And ambitions can change, right? Like the creature's ambition to-, to learn and to become more human, to be accepted, over time, when it-, when-, when the creature realises that it's not gonna get that and those ambitions are not gonna be fulfilled, his ambitions kind of warp and change and twist into revenge or, you know, its own kind of justice. That could still be seen as ambition.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah, it could.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: I've got one more quote I want to talk about. So this is Victor Frankenstein talking again, who is a really interesting character, erm, in terms of the theme of ambition. So the quote is: "That passion which afterwards ruled my destiny."

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: So, that passion, the passion that he has, "which afterwards ruled my destiny," he's kind of blaming ambition.

STEVEN CAMDEN: [laughs]

HOLLIE McNISH: I think he's kind of separating himself a little bit. [laughs]

STEVEN CAMDEN: Do you-, do you think? It's a lesson, right? It-, that passion "which afterwards ruled my destiny," it feels to me like what Mary Shelley's saying is it can consume, it can consume you, it will take over and it will lead you somewhere; if it-, if your ambition is unchecked or inconsiderate of other people it's gonna lead you somewhere tragic.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah.

STEVEN CAMDEN: And I think that you can't really argue that that-, you know, it's-, it's a tragic story! Right?



HOLLIE McNISH: It is a tragic story. And it's a warning.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah, I think so too.

HOLLIE McNISH: About ambition.

STEVEN CAMDEN: I really agree.

HOLLIE McNISH: About lofty ambition.

STEVEN CAMDEN: I really agree.

MUSIC: [organ music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Okay, so before we finish let's go through the main points one more time. Mary Shelley isn't saying that ambition is bad, but warns us too much ambition can be dangerous. So Victor says since he was a child he was "imbued with lofty ambition", but by the end of the book he's saying avoid ambition.

STEVEN CAMDEN: And the creature is ambitious too. He wants to be accepted; to do so it teaches himself to read, making steps to try and fit in and get connection. That ambition fails, and that ambition warps and twists and turns into revenge, which drives him to murder.

HOLLIE McNISH: So, yeah, I guess a warning.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: Too much ambition can be a bad thing, but also you can't always blame your ambition for actions that you've carried out.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Completely.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Thanks for listening to this Bitesize English Literature podcast. For more help and advice search "Bitesize" on the BBC Sounds app. You can also find the other themes we cover: knowledge, isolation, prejudice, justice, and in the next episode, nature verses nurture.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays, then organ music]

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