

MUSIC: [BBC Sounds intro music plays]

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MUSIC: [organ music plays, then Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Hello, I'm Hollie McNish, and this is the Bitesize English Literature podcast. This series is all about Mary Shelley's Gothic novel "Frankenstein". I'm gonna take you through the key themes so you'll be ready for your English Literature GCSE.

And I'm not alone because helping me is the writer Steven Camden, who is also known as Polarbear.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Hello, Hollie. How're you doing?

HOLLIE McNISH: I'm very well, thank you. [STEVEN: Yeah?] Especially now.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Are we in exam mode?

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah! I'm in exam mode! [STEVEN: Good.] I'm in full exam mode! [STEVEN: Good.]

So if you're like me and you find yourself getting distracted by your phone or your laptop when you listen to podcasts, try putting some headphones in, sticking your phone in your pocket and going for a walk, or maybe lie down and relax, and listen to us chatting about this text while closing your eyes.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: So "Frankenstein" is the story of scientist Victor Frankenstein, who creates a living creature he finds so hideous that he's shunned by his creator and everyone else who sees him, forcing this creature to hide away from people and to live alone.

The creature's loneliness turns into hatred, and he takes revenge on his creator, Victor Frankenstein.

If you need a recap on the plot, go back and listen again to Episode 1, where we go into it in a bit more detail.

Isolation is one of the key themes in "Frankenstein", and that's what we're gonna look at in this episode. Now, being on your own doesn't always make you feel lonely, but loneliness is a powerful emotion. Would you say so?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Of course.

HOLLIE McNISH: And it's so different: loneliness and being alone is so different. [STEVEN: Yeah.] But the sort of isolation we're talking about here is that he is shunned.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Exactly, the choice taken away; other people pushing you away, not wanting anything to do with you. And I think where that leads you, the steps that follow it: feeling different, feeling outcast, like you don't fit, and ultimately leading to feeling like a monster.

HOLLIE McNISH: So we're gonna hear something from the text now. The creature has already murdered Frankenstein's little brother William. He finds Victor Frankenstein and begs him to create him a female companion, someone else like him so he doesn't have to suffer isolation. Listen out for the pain in his voice in this clip.

CLIP

THE CREATURE: I am alone and miserable. Man will not associate with me. But one as deformed as myself would not totally deny herself to me. You must create for me a female.

VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN: I refuse. Shall I create another like yourself whose joint wickedness might desolate the world?

THE CREATURE: If any being felt emotions of benevolence towards me I should return them a hundredfold.

CLIP ENDS

HOLLIE McNISH: You can hear the pain in his voice.

STEVEN CAMDEN: For sure.

HOLLIE McNISH: For sure. And he says, "I am alone and miserable." And it's a—

STEVEN CAMDEN: It's a good one; a good one to remember, right?

HOLLIE McNISH: It's a really good one to remember. And it's a good idea to have a pen and paper so you can write any important quotes or words down. So before we move on to talk about some of the other characters and how isolation affects them, let's stay with the creature and talk a bit more about his isolation and a bit more about that quote, "I am alone and miserable." Say it over and over as many times as you need!

So this is when the creature has already killed Victor Frankenstein's younger brother William Frankenstein and he's framed Victor Frankenstein's friend Justine, the servant and friend of family who was sentenced to death for the crime. The creature finds Victor Frankenstein and he's basically saying to him, "This is all because I'm lonely; I have murdered a child—"

STEVEN CAMDEN: It couldn't be clearer, exactly, it couldn't be clearer, could it? "I am alone and miserable; look what you made me do."

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah. And this sentence has a very strong and certain tone, in my opinion: "I am alone and miserable." There's no doubt. [STEVEN: No.] And it's being used as a justification for... murder, [STEVEN: Yeah.] really. "I am alone and miserable." It starts with the first person, "I am—"

STEVEN CAMDEN: Miserable and misery: we get a lot of it, right? In fact we don't just get it from the creature either; Victor uses it a lot when he's describing himself as well: "Who is-, who is the monster?" What both of them do leads them to misery.

HOLLIE McNISH: Some of the other characters are alone but they choose to be. [STEVEN: Yeah.] This creature is alone; doesn't choose to be. So this word "alone", "I am alone," is-, has different meanings for different characters in this book. So let's just think about it from the creature's point of view. [STEVEN: Yeah.] "I am alone and miserable."

STEVEN CAMDEN: That's important, right? I mean, think about as soon as he's given life the first thing that happens to him is that Victor Frankenstein, the-, the person who created him, is horrified by him and runs away in disgust and he's left on his own.

He then has to hide from people because he knows that they're scared of him. And basically the more he's on his own the more bitter and the more vengeful and twisted he becomes.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Isolation is such a key theme in Gothic novels. Gothic novels use ideas about the supernatural to explore what it means to be human, so they often have what we call "monsters" in them. [STEVEN: Yeah.]

They're often quite scary. There's often violence, like many people who die in Frankenstein". This is a-, it's a violent novel, and that's-, that's often the case in Gothic novels, and isolation is a big theme in Gothic novels. If you talk about isolation, tell us that it's a big theme in Gothic novels!

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Next, let's take a look at Frankenstein, Victor Frankenstein, the scientist, and what his experience of isolation tells us, because he chooses to be on his own at first, doesn't he?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah. I think that's a big distinction, to my mind, that the search for his knowledge, his kind of quest for this kind of betterment and scientific discovery, is what leads him to isolate himself. He doesn't write to his family, he doesn't tell anyone where he-, what he's doing, he keeps it all a secret. What would you have done if one of your mates had said to you, "Look, I'm just gonna make this creature out of these body parts, can you—"

HOLLIE McNISH: No, you'd maybe write back fast.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah! [both laugh]

HOLLIE McNISH: "Stop!" [laughs]

STEVEN CAMDEN: But it's even a quote, like, from – it's early in the story when he's creating the creature, is, "I shunned my fellow creatures as if I had been guilty of a crime."

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Again, the idea of being shunned. But that he actively did it himself. Not "I was shunned" like the creature was; the creature was shunned by the people. Victor actually said, "I shunned my fellow creatures." It's not – like you said before, it's not a coincidence that these words are chosen.

So even if it's just you remembering "I shunned my fellow creatures" said by scientist Victor.

There's also the angle, I guess, you know, secrecy being isolating. Like, he knows that the creature has killed his brother, and Justine is taking the fall for this, and just the isolation of a secret, like, that's a big one to keep and hold in terms of what he makes you feel by you're completely by yourself and isolated.

HOLLIE McNISH: And the loneliness with Victor Frankenstein, this loneliness follows him all around the world, which, again, if you look at the place where this is set, the setting of this text, it really mimics this idea that by the end of the text he is in the Arctic.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah, the loneliest place.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: So this takes us to the explorer, Robert Walton. So he's the explorer who Frankenstein tells his story to, and he is also the lonely character; he also talks about wanting to be near people. So, Steven, you've got a quote from the very start of the story to discuss Robert Walton very nicely.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah, he's writing home to his sister. And the reason I like this one is, right, it's really clear. He literally says, "I bitterly feel the want of a friend."

This is Robert Walton as this brave, ambitious explorer. And he literally said, "I bitterly feel the want of a friend," which means "I want a fri-, I wish I had a mate with me." Look at the choice of words, like "bit-, bitterly". Bitter. We're in-, we're in the North Pole, it's bitterly cold. It all-, it's all on purpose, right? Mary Shelley's choosing these words again very carefully. That's why it's another good quote.

HOLLIE McNISH: So, yeah, as you say, this quote, "I bitterly feel the want of a friend," this word "bitterly", Mary Shelley is specific with her choice of language. And I think she's a very, very good writer. Erm—

STEVEN CAMDEN: She's all right, isn't she!

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah, she is all right!

And this is an example of pathetic fallacy.

STEVEN CAMDEN: What's that?

HOLLIE McNISH: So that's describing something, so here the weather, with human emotions to reflect the way the character is feeling. So it just make-, it just combines everything. [STEVEN: Yeah.] So pathetic fallacy is this amazing linguistic technique to get-, to get into your exam, but it's an amazing linguistic technique to-, to write with. [STEVEN: Yeah.]

So the story starts and ends at the North Pole, a really lonely place, isolated location. Walton, Robert Walton, the explorer, he has chosen to go to this location. Victor Frankenstein ends up in this location. The search for knowledge and glory for both Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton isolate them from the rest of society.

STEVEN CAMDEN: It's interesting there the way they tie in, like this idea of ambition and the glory and the knowledge, the pursuit of knowledge that we talked about in the other podcast about knowledge, this is what it leads to: their quest leads them to be completely isolated.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Which is why it fits so perfectly in the North Pole.

HOLLIE McNISH: Pathetic fallacy is such a great linguistic technique to talk about in your exam. A really good example of it here in "Frankenstein". And there is more about pathetic fallacy on the Bitesize website.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Brilliant.

MUSIC: [organ music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Let's think a bit about Mary Shelley. So, Mary Shelley wrote this book, and she knew a lot about loneliness herself. So let's just think a little bit about that.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah, at this point in her life, at 18, she's already lost her mother.

HOLLIE McNISH: She died in childbirth giving birth to Mary Shelley.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Also there's reference to her feeling abandoned by her father after her mother's death, and he's busy, and she's already lost a child.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah.

STEVEN CAMDEN: She's lost a child at this point.

HOLLIE McNISH: There's-, there are also references to her feeling abandoned by Percy Shelley, [STEVEN: Yeah.] who was her-, her lover [STEVEN: Mm-hmm.] and father of her child. And yet she's-, she's-, at 18, she's a teenager. [STEVEN: Yeah.]

It's so important to have the context, context for the author, the setting of the story, that at the time people couldn't believe that a woman had written this-, this text, especially a young woman, which kind of to me seems ridiculous, knowing what Mary Shelley had gone through.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

MUSIC: [organ music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: So let's go over the main points one last time. The story tells us that too much isolation is not necessarily good for us, whether you choose it or maybe especially if it's forced on you.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: And that isolation can turn into other negative emotions, like hatred and anger.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: So at first Victor Frankenstein chooses to be alone, but then because of his actions he has to isolate himself from society; his secrets make him lonely.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Quote: "I shunned my fellow creatures." He actively shunned, he pushed other people away. But the creature, on the other hand, has never known anything except loneliness. So while he sees other people have friends and family and loved ones, watching the DeLaceys and watching other people, he wants it so much he begs Victor Frankenstein to create a companion for him. "I am alone and I am miserable." Couldn't be clearer there. Right? He wants this.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah. And these two quotes are great to use together. One quote from Victor Frankenstein, "I shunned my fellow creatures." [STEVEN: Yeah.] The other quote, from the creature, "I am alone and miserable." If you wanted to compare these it's good to get something about the language in. They both start with the word "I".

STEVEN CAMDEN: Mm-hmm.

HOLLIE McNISH: "I shunned... I am..." They're both talking about themselves.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Owning it.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah, the actual sentences are lonely.

MUSIC: [music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Thanks so much for listening to this Bitesize English Literature podcast. Check out the other episodes in this series. We also talk about knowledge, justice, nature versus nurture, ambition, and the next episode in this series, prejudice.

MUSIC: [music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: For more from the Bitesize team, search "Bitesize" on BBC Sounds.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays, then organ music plays]

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