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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 this is the last episode in our series on the Gothic novel "Frankenstein" by Mary Shelley.

We've already talked about some of the key themes: knowledge, isolation, ambition. And today, the last theme is one I think is really interesting to think about: nature versus nurture.

Joining me is Steven Camden, AKA Polarbear. So, Steven, nature versus nurture.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: What does this mean?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Okay, basically, this is the relationship between what we are born with and is ingrained in us innately versus what we learn as a result of our environment and our experiences. Are we destined to be who we are already or does what happens to us make us who we are.

HOLLIE McNISH: So have a pen ready to make notes because we're gonna give you some brilliant quotes to write down. We're gonna break the theme down character by character, and in this episode we're really gonna focus on the creature. Let's hear a section from the text.

The creature has found Victor Frankenstein and wants Victor Frankenstein to listen to him. He's trying to tell his creator that he is not a monster, that he was born good but the way the world has treated him is what has caused him to do bad things.

CLIP

THE CREATURE: I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed.

I was benevolent and good; but misery made me a fiend. Make me happy and I shall again be virtuous.

END OF CLIP

HOLLIE McNISH: [grimaces through her teeth]

STEVEN CAMDEN: It's so sad.

HOLLIE McNISH: It's so sad. But, but, but. There's always a 'but' with Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein".

STEVEN CAMDEN: Mm-hmm.

HOLLIE McNISH: The quote that really stands out is: "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend." And this is such an important quote, so we're gonna keep coming back to it. What—

STEVEN CAMDEN: It's my favourite quote.

HOLLIE McNISH: Oh, is it? Nice.

STEVEN CAMDEN: It is.

HOLLIE McNISH: So, what's he saying here?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Well, he's saying... he's saying that he... he wasn't born this way, like he wasn't born a m-, a m-, a, quote, unquote, "monster". "I was benevolent and good," I was giving, I was kind; and all the bad things, all the sadness that I've experienced, the loneliness, the isolation, the prejudice, has "made me a fiend," turned me into this evil thing that is capable of these horrible acts.

It-, it's like a punch in the heart, isn't it really, I th-, I think. It's my favourite quote of the whole story, to be honest.

HOLLIE McNISH: So I think I'm less sympathetic with him. I still am sympathetic [STEVEN: It's crazy isn't it, I know.] but I just have to keep reminding myself of the murders.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah, yeah, for sure.

HOLLIE McNISH: "I was" – it starts with the first person – "I" – he's talking about himself – "was" – and "made" – it's in the past, like "I was benevolent and good" – he's not even saying... there is... "it's still in me" – "I was" – he uses the past tense in this quote.

STEVEN CAMDEN: But, Hollie, come on. I'm fighting the creature's corner. Just think about what's happened to this creature, all right. The very first thing that you open your eyes and the-, the person who made you is horrified and disgusted and runs away. Literally, love runs out the door.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Right? And you're-, you're trying to learn, you want to try and make connection, and at every turn you are not only – you are shunned – these are words, right, they're using, right – you're c-, you're an "ogre", you're a "wretch", you're a "demon".

HOLLIE McNISH: And "misery made me." So this is – I'm so sorry to say it, but it's really good alliteration, like M, M, M, "Misery Made Me." And it really personifies misery, as if-, as-, as if he is not to blame. So it's quite passive, like "misery made me...become a bad person."

STEVEN CAMDEN: But it's like a before and after. So remember the quote. You can split it in two, right? "I was benevolent and good" – left hand – "misery made me a fiend" – right hand.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah.

STEVEN CAMDEN: It's before and after.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah.

STEVEN CAMDEN: It really is. Like there is-, there's the scales. So I-, that's how I would remember it. It's like I'm holding what-, you know, what I was, the goodness; and the badness is in my other hand. And if you tip – you've tipped me this way on the scales. It-, I-, man, it just makes me wanna cry! It makes me wanna cry.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah, it does. And it's such an important quote. And it's important to remember, you know, this-, this text was written, it was written by a person. [chuckles] It was written by a person thinking about other human beings. It's not just specific to this novel "Frankenstein". This quote, "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend" is a HUGE quote.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: And it's so interesting.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Let's keep thinking about the creature, because he's-, he's really the main character when it comes to this theme – isn't it? – nature versus nurture. Think about what happens to the creature. As you said, the very first thing that happens to him is that he is abandoned by the person that created him. Then everyone he sees runs away from him in horror.

He tries to be good, we see him try to be good, but – give a few examples of how he tries to be good? He tries to learn language. He wants love. He takes wood to the DeLaceys, he takes firewood to them, he-, he wants them, he watches them, and constantly – which we've talked about in the podcast on knowledge – he-, he keeps learning, and every time he learns he learns about prejudice, he learns about people being horrendous to him. Erm, and it's only when he's rejected for the third time that he turns into what he's called a fiend.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Well, the next character, William, I think is very important because Mary Shelley has put a child, a child who is murdered by the creature, which makes it so much harder to take all responsibility away from the creature, I think, in terms of nature versus nurture.

STEVEN CAMDEN: No, completely. But then how do you – what better way to make your point that nurture and the environment causes us to act how we do than to take it to the extreme of...

HOLLIE McNISH: A child.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Of murdering a child. It's a really clear communication of her message that, right, this is how bad it can be if the environment and the circumstances are not-, not happy or supportive.

HOLLIE McNISH: Absolutely. This is another reason it's important that this character is a child, why we have a child in it, because he sees the creature and calls him an ogre. This is a word that a child has learnt. He's learnt to be disgusted by the sight of a certain looking person. That has been taught to him by – implied here – fairy tales, stories. The word "ogre" is so important for this. And we talked about that before when we were talking about prejudice, but I think it's a really good one to bring in here too.

The child is so young. Children are supposed to be innocent—

STEVEN CAMDEN: —Nurtured prejudice.

HOLLIE McNISH: It's nurtured prejudice, completely. He's already made up his mind. He's been told to hate things that look the way he has been told is-, is ugly, a word I absolutely hate. But also, is William right to call him an ogre?

I mean, remember that this creature is huge, much bigger than humans; he's made up of sewn-up dead body parts. William is a child, the creature is huge. He could be a threat? So is it-, is it nature? Is it natural that you see somebody who's made up of-, of dead body parts and is much bigger than you and assume that you may be in danger? Or is it nurtured because of the fairy stories—

STEVEN CAMDEN: —Well, that's why it's interesting, right? Like all the themes in the story, it's not-, it's not a yes or a no or right or wrong in this. "I was benevolent and good, and I-, I've been driven to this." But then the fact that he's even aware of himself means he does have free will and is choosing. So it's not as simple, it's not just as simple as you put-, [HOLLIE: No.] yeah, you could put someone else in these circumstances and they wouldn't be driven to murder. That's why it's so gorgeous, right? Because it sparks discussion and it sparks thought in yourself.

HOLLIE McNISH: And it's a brilliant quote to learn. So when I was doing my GCSEs I would learn quotes to help me, to help—

STEVEN CAMDEN: —Yeah, it's helping you make a point, right?

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah. "I am-, I was benev-, I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend." If you remember that quote, everything just bursts from it for this-, for this theme.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: So finally, one more character. Let's think about Victor Frankenstein. So Victor Frankenstein's a scientist. He's playing with nature, isn't he?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Mm-hmm.

HOLLIE McNISH: Remember, when he's trying to create the creature he steals body parts from charnel houses, so places where human remains and the bodies of the dead are kept at night. He's always alone. And-, and he says, "My eyes were insensible to the charms of nature."

STEVEN CAMDEN: He's not see-, he's not paying attention to what's natural and what is right when he's stealing body parts to cut up for his own ambitious project.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah. I do sometimes forget, strangely, and because the language is SO great, you know, the language that he learns to speak in, I have forgotten that he is made from stitched-up dead body parts.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Mm-hmm.

HOLLIE McNISH: I'm not sure if I wouldn't be slightly frightened, [chuckles] if I'm trying to think how I would act!

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Let's sum up what Mary Shelley is potentially telling us through this novel about nature verses nurture. So there's an obvious big question.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: Is anyone born bad?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: Still undecided.

STEVEN CAMDEN: But she's clearly saying that the creature wasn't born bad and that what happens to it, the more the creature tries to be good, the worse it's treated in return, which t-, which steers him towards badness and bad deeds.

HOLLIE McNISH: And the focus on the quote, "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend."

STEVEN CAMDEN: Remember those two sides, right? The two sides of the scales. "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend."

HOLLIE McNISH: And this idea that nurture happens so early. So from the moment he was – not born – created, he was abandoned, simply for the way he looked.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah. And even William, the little, little boy, has already been nurtured to be prejudiced.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah. And specifically that word "ogre" is an important word.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Polarbear, thank you so much. I think we've really got into "Frankenstein". We've talked about knowledge, isolation, prejudice, justice, ambition, and nature versus nurture. Do you have any final thoughts?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Remember your quotes. And remember that these issues and these themes they aren't black and white, they aren't as simple as right or wrong, but you're using the quotes to show what Mary Shelley is trying to do.

HOLLIE McNISH: Thank you. And well done for taking the time out to listen to this podcast. Listen again, listen as many times as you want so you're super ready for your exam.

You can also find the other podcasts in this series. There's one on "Romeo and Juliet", "Jane Eyre", "Anita and Me", "An Inspector Calls", "Blood Brothers", and "Macbeth". Just search "Bitesize" on BBC Sounds.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays, then organ music]

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