

CHARACTERS Victor Frankenstein

Five key things about Victor

1. **Victor** comes from a **relatively wealthy family** from **Geneva**. He is **loved by his family and friends** and admired by Robert Walton.
2. His **passion for learning** develops into an **unhealthy obsession**, isolating him from those he loves.
3. He can be seen as a **tragic hero** whose **flaws lead to his own and others' destruction**.
4. His **secret** makes him **unstable**, melancholic and revengeful.
5. By the end, **Victor** begins to **resemble the monster** he created.



What do we learn about Victor at the beginning of the novel?

- He has a privileged life, and enjoys his childhood with Elizabeth as a companion and Clerval as a friend.
- Hints of instability surface when he admits to a **'violent'** temper.
- His early scientific interest develops at Ingolstadt University. He makes **'rapid'** progress in his studies.
- His desire to create life involves him in sinister pursuits.

How does Victor change?

- Obsessiveness is a childhood trait, but Victor is protected at home. At Ingolstadt, his obsessions develop unchecked and damage his health. (Chapters 4–6)
- Two events, William's death and Justine's execution, intensify his guilt and misery and make him want revenge. (Chapters 7–9)
- Victor's emotions change from outrage to acceptance when the monster requests a mate. However, his ability to be 'moved' by the monster's needs is temporary. (Chapter 17)
- Victor considers the future, when making his second creation, something he did not do first time round. Nevertheless, his destruction of the monster's mate is brutal. (Chapter 20)
- Victor's thoughts begin to mimic the monster's. His **dialogue** with Walton near the end reveals his competing thoughts: he warns Walton about dangerous ambition but encourages him to hunt the monster. (Chapter 24)

Five key quotations

1. Victor's early memories about himself: **'Curiosity, earnest research to learn the hidden laws of nature, gladness akin to rapture'** (Chapter 2)
2. Victor, imagining his future god-like status: **'A new species would bless me as its creator and source'** (Chapter 4)
3. Victor's desire for revenge: **'the fiend that lurked in my heart'** (Chapter 9)
4. Victor to the monster: **'There can be no community between you and me; we are enemies.'** (Chapter 10)
5. Victor to Walton: **'Mine has been a tale of horrors'** (Chapter 23)

Note it!

Victor is presented as much loved but his actions reveal him as a taker rather than a giver of love. He knows Elizabeth will marry him, despite warning her of a **'dreadful'** secret. He notices her waning **'vivacity'** but fails to recognise the reason why.

Exam focus

How can I write about Victor at the start of the novel? AO1

You can comment on how Shelley presents Victor as a child and adolescent.

At the start of the novel, Shelley presents Victor as a happy child, with a passion for learning. When Victor recalls his past he vividly remembers: 'Curiosity, earnest research to learn the hidden laws of nature, gladness akin to rapture'. The abstract nouns 'curiosity', 'gladness' and 'rapture' and the adjective 'earnest' all have positive, intensely pleasurable meanings. From Ingolstadt onwards Victor's feelings become predominantly negative but their intensity remains.

Topic sentence refers to specific point in novel

Relevant quotation is fluently embedded

Explores the language

Summarises and moves the point on

Now you try!

Finish this paragraph about Victor's development later in the novel. Use one of the quotations from the list.

Shelley shows how Victor is deluded in his ambition to create life by.....

THEMES Knowledge and ambition

Five key things about the themes of knowledge and ambition

1. **Knowledge** is linked to **discovery**. Victor, Walton and the monster seek respectively to discover the **mystery of life**, the North Pole's **magnetic power** and of human **language** and **understanding**.
2. Desire for **knowledge** is a '**thirst**' for **Victor**, a **need** that must be satisfied.
3. Victor and Walton's **ambitions** are **self-centred**. The **monster's ambition**, to **develop relationships** with others, is more **humble**.
4. **Ambition** requires characters to **face physical** and **psychological** barriers.
5. **Knowledge** and **ambition** are shown to have **positive** and **negative** consequences.



What do knowledge and ambition mean and what are their effects?

- Knowledge is information and understanding gained by experience and education.
- Victor and Walton's pursuit of knowledge reflects antisocial ideas of excess and danger. The monster's knowledge reflects a desire for social connections.
- Ambition is a strong desire or yearning. Victor and Walton want to do extraordinary things. The monster's desire for a mate is more modest.
- Shelley examines the moral consequences of Victor and Walton's ambitions, which both endanger lives. Victor will not take responsibility for his creation, whereas Walton agrees to abandon his expedition.

How are the themes of knowledge and ambition woven into the narrative?

- Walton's expedition introduces and concludes the narrative.
- Victor's pursuit of scientific knowledge is key to his story.
- The monster's linguistic, moral and emotional knowledge is key to his story. Once he masters language, he realises that love, desire and prejudice characterise human relations.
- Victor and Walton's ambitions are fixed, whereas the monster's ambitions expand. All experience negative consequences after acquiring knowledge.

Five key quotations

1. Walton's ambition: **'the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind'** (Letter I)
2. Victor's desire for knowledge: **'It was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn'** (Chapter 2)
3. The monster's developing knowledge: **'Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous and magnificent, yet so vicious and base?'** (Chapter 13)
4. Victor to Walton on the dangers of ambition: **'I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been'** (Letter IV)
5. The monster on the effect of painful knowledge: **'It clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it, like a lichen on the rock.'** (Chapter 13)

Note it!

Victor's dying words express ambivalence towards ambition. First telling Walton to **'avoid ambition'** he then backtracks, saying **'Yet why do I say this?'** – questioning his own advice. Even as he dies, ideas about ambition retain some power over him.

Exam focus

How does Shelley explore knowledge and ambition? AO1

You can write about Victor's desire to create life.

Shelley explores the theme of knowledge and ambition through Victor's experience of creating the monster and dealing with the consequences. Victor's lofty ambition to create life is expressed as a desire to learn 'the secrets of heaven and earth'. 'Secrets' are usually not meant to be known and the phrase 'heaven and earth' implies that Victor is overreaching the powers of man. Shelley's choice of language makes the reader consider whether he should be trying to acquire it.

Clear topic sentence

Relevant fluently embedded quotation

Explores meaning

Links language and theme

Now you try!

Finish this paragraph about knowledge and ambition. Use one of the quotations from the list.

Shelley shows that some knowledge is difficult to accept when the monster

My progress

Needs more work

Getting there

Sorted!