

The Transformation Of Victor Frankenstein's Character

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Introduction

Victor Frankenstein's transformation is the central tragedy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. He begins as an affectionate and intellectually ambitious young man who believes knowledge can enlarge human power and reduce suffering. By the end, he is physically ruined, emotionally isolated, and consumed by revenge. The change is not caused by scientific curiosity alone. Victor's downfall grows from the way he pursues knowledge, separates achievement from responsibility, conceals the consequences of his choices, and repeatedly allows pride and fear to guide him (Shelley, 1818/2012; Mellor, 1988). His ambition is visible before the experiment begins, which means the novel does not present a simple fall from innocence after one catastrophic mistake. Victor wants discovery, distinction, and gratitude from the "new species" he imagines creating. What changes is the intensity of those desires and the narrowing of his moral world. Shelley therefore uses his transformation to examine responsibility, secrecy, parenthood, isolation, and the danger of seeking creative power without accepting obligations toward what one creates.

Ambition Before the Creature Lives

Victor describes a happy childhood in a loving Geneva household, surrounded by Elizabeth Lavenza, Henry Clerval, and parents who value education and affection. This background matters because it shows that he is not ignorant of care. When he later abandons the creature, he withholds from another being the protection he received himself. His intellectual development also reveals a tendency to seek exceptional knowledge. As a boy he is fascinated by Agrippa, Paracelsus, and other writers who promise access to hidden powers of nature. At Ingolstadt, modern chemistry redirects the same desire. Victor imagines discovering the principle of life and believes a new species may bless him as its creator. Benevolent goals and personal glory become inseparable. Mellor (1988) argues that the novel critiques a form of masculine scientific ambition that attempts creation without the social and reproductive responsibilities usually attached to bringing life into the world. Victor's problem is therefore not curiosity itself but the belief that discovery can be separated from relationship, consultation, and accountability.

Obsession and the Moment of Creation

The decisive transformation begins before the creature opens its eyes. Victor withdraws from family, friendship, health, and the natural world while constructing the body. He studies decay, works through the seasons, ignores correspondence, and allows the project to narrow his identity until imagined success matters more than the human cost of pursuing it. He also plans obsessively for animation while barely considering what a living being would require afterward. When the creature awakens, Victor's fantasy of beauty collapses into horror. He flees even though the being has not harmed anyone and appears confused and dependent. This moment exposes the gap between wanting the prestige of creation and accepting the duties that creation produces. Henry Clerval later nurses Victor through collapse, making the contrast especially sharp: Victor survives because another person cares for him when he is helpless, while the creature receives no comparable support. Shelley thus frames Victor's rejection not simply as fear of ugliness but as a failure to remain present when success creates unexpected responsibility.

Secrecy, Guilt, and Partial Recognition

After William Frankenstein is murdered, Victor sees the creature near the scene and believes it responsible, yet he remains silent while Justine Moritz is prosecuted and executed. He fears that his account will appear unbelievable, but private guilt becomes a substitute for public responsibility. Victor repeatedly calls himself the true cause of the deaths around him while doing little to correct the conditions that produce further harm. His encounter with the creature on the glacier creates a moment of partial recognition. The creature describes learning language, observing the De Lacey family, assisting them secretly, longing for companionship, and eventually responding to rejection with rage. These experiences do not excuse murder, but they complicate Victor's claim that he created a being who was evil from the beginning. Victor briefly accepts some responsibility by agreeing to make a companion. Even then, he works alone and in secrecy. His moral problem is therefore consistent: he recognizes obligation intermittently but refuses the sustained social accountability needed to act on that recognition.

The Female Creature and the Return of Isolation

Victor's decision to destroy the unfinished female creature is morally complex because his fears are not trivial. A second being might reject the agreement, reproduce, or create additional danger. The novel does not present the request as a risk-free solution. The deeper problem lies in the way Victor decides. He makes a promise, begins the work, imagines catastrophic possibilities, and destroys the body while the creature watches, all without consultation, negotiation, or any alternative plan. He again treats a decision affecting multiple lives as his private burden alone. The resulting threat—"I will be with you on your wedding-night"—is then interpreted through Victor's continuing self-

centeredness. He assumes the creature means to kill him and does not adequately protect Elizabeth, who becomes the victim. The episode shows that Victor's transformation is not simply from optimism to despair. His deeper character pattern remains remarkably stable: he acts alone, imagines himself at the center of events, and recognizes consequences only after they have become irreversible (Shelley, 1818/2012).

From Remorse to Revenge

The deaths of Clerval, Elizabeth, and Victor's father destroy the relationships that once connected him to ordinary life. At this point remorse gives way to revenge, and he pursues the creature across Europe and into the Arctic. The transformation is psychologically significant because vengeance provides Victor with a new purpose after responsibility has failed to do so. He begins to resemble the being he condemns: both are isolated, grieving, and willing to sacrifice their remaining lives to the destruction of the other. The creature leaves food and messages to keep Victor alive so that the pursuit can continue, turning revenge into the relationship that now binds creator and creation most completely. When Walton meets Victor, the dying man offers contradictory lessons. He warns against excessive ambition but also encourages the crew toward heroic perseverance. This inconsistency suggests genuine insight without complete self-understanding. Victor can identify the cost of his obsession, yet he still finds glory attractive. His tragedy lies partly in learning too late and never fully converting recognition into responsibility.

Conclusion

Victor Frankenstein changes from an ambitious student into an exhausted pursuer of revenge, but his transformation develops through repeated choices rather than one sudden moral collapse. Curiosity becomes dangerous when it is joined with isolation and the desire for exceptional recognition. Success becomes guilt when Victor rejects the creature and conceals what he knows, while guilt becomes vengeance after repeated losses narrow his identity. Shelley does not condemn science or learning as such. Clerval, Walton, and the creature all pursue knowledge in different ways, and the novel's deeper concern is knowledge detached from accountability (Mellor, 1988). Victor's greatest mistake is not that he fails to predict every consequence; no creator can do that. It is that he refuses to remain present when consequences appear. The novel therefore remains relevant to modern debates about research and technological innovation because it insists that capability creates continuing obligations. Creation is not merely a moment of achievement. It begins a relationship with users, risks, maintenance, unintended effects, and people whose lives may be changed by what has been made.

References

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(Original work published 1818).