

# Clerval and Frankenstein

Literature, Russian Literature



In their formative years, Henry Clerval and Victor Frankenstein lead parallel lives; they share experiences, morals, and a love for knowledge. When Frankenstein leaves for Ingolstadt, however, their once-similar traits and values diverge. Clerval remains generous and humane while Frankenstein becomes self-absorbed and irresponsible. Throughout Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Clerval's role as compassionate caregiver contrasts with Frankenstein's selfish personality, enhancing Frankenstein's negligent nature.

Clerval acts selflessly upon his arrival at Ingolstadt, choosing to care for Frankenstein instead of attending his own classes. Clerval drops everything to help Frankenstein, even after struggling for months to gain permission to attend the university. Frankenstein says, " Henry was my only nurse. I afterwards learned that, knowing my father's advanced age and unfitness for so long a journey, and how wretched my sickness would make Elizabeth, he spared them this grief by concealing the extent of my disorder. He knew that I could not have a more kind and attentive nurse than himself; and, firm in the hope he felt of my recovery, he did not doubt that, instead of doing harm, he performed the kindest action that he could towards them." (Shelley 64). Clerval's attentiveness to Frankenstein juxtaposes Frankenstein's negligence in caring for his monster. Shelley paints a picture of irony as she describes Frankenstein, ill because he failed to take care of his monster in the very way that Clerval is taking care of him. Additionally, Clerval's choice to withhold Frankenstein's health problems from his family plays into the theme of secrecy. Clerval keeps this secret with benign intent; his sole goal is to protect Elizabeth and Alphonse from distress. Frankenstein is also

secretive, but unlike Clerval, his suppression of information is putting his loved ones into danger. Frankenstein's and Clerval's uses of secrecy exhibit their differing priorities and levels of compassion.

Upon meeting his professors, Clerval feigns ignorance to reduce Frankenstein's discomfort, even though Frankenstein refuses to tell him the real reason behind his poor health and depression. Frankenstein says, "Clerval, whose eyes and feelings were always quick in discerning the sensations of others, declined the subject, alleging, in excuse, his total ignorance . . . he never attempted to draw my secret from me; and although I loved him with a mixture of affection and reverence that knew no bounds, yet I could never persuade myself to confide to him that event which was so often present to my recollection but which I feared the detail to another would only impress more deeply." (Shelley 72-73). First, Clerval delays his schooling to take care of Frankenstein, and then, while being introduced to his professors, he tiptoes around the subject of science to minimize Frankenstein's stress. Clerval will clearly go to great lengths to protect Frankenstein, fulfilling his role as caregiver. The dichotomy between Frankenstein and Clerval grows stronger as Frankenstein fails to reciprocate Clerval's sensitivity, leaving him in the dark about his dilemma.

Frankenstein's negligent nature ultimately causes the death of Clerval. By insisting that they part ways in Scotland, Frankenstein greatly increases Clerval's chances of becoming another of the monster's victims.

Frankenstein is well aware of the danger, saying, "I feared the effects of the daemon's disappointment. He might remain in Switzerland and wreak his

vengeance on my relatives. This idea pursued me and tormented me at every moment from which I might otherwise have snatched repose and peace . . . Sometimes I thought that the fiend followed me and might expedite my remissness by murdering my companion. When these thoughts possessed me, I would not quit Henry for a moment, but followed him as his shadow, to protect him from the fancied rage of his destroyer." (Shelley 197). Frankenstein's self-interest outweighs his fear for Clerval's safety. In hoping to rid himself of his own problems, he disregards the companion to whom he owes his life. Because he is ashamed of his creation, he does not warn Clerval about the monster's presence and thirst for revenge. Though it is tragic, Clerval's death is essential to the impact and message of the novel. It secures his role as a foil, showing how two men with near identical upbringings can end up with divergent understandings of right and wrong. At the time, Frankenstein believed he was doing the right thing by trying to deal with the monster by himself. However, after Clerval's death, it is clear that Frankenstein's moral compass is skewed by selfishness and shame. Clerval's death also strengthens Frankenstein's story to Walton, adding a layer of tragedy that further influences Walton's decision to return home. Clerval brings optimism, complexity, and balance to Frankenstein. He is one of the few characters who remains in good health and high spirits while he is alive, offsetting Frankenstein's constant misery. He has a way of bringing out the best in Frankenstein; their experiences together in nature are some of the only times the reader sees Frankenstein in a good mood. That being said, for the most part, Clerval's care and thoughtfulness are not matched by Frankenstein, thus illuminating Frankenstein's egotistical personality.