



FRANKENSTEIN: EXPLORATION AND AMBITION: MODEL ANSWER

Table of Contents

<i>FRANKENSTEIN: EXPLORATION AND AMBITION: QUESTION</i>	2
<i>FRANKENSTEIN: EXPLORATION AND AMBITION: MODEL ANSWER OUTLINE</i>	3
<i>ESSAY OUTLINE</i>	3
<i>FRANKENSTEIN: EXPLORATION AND AMBITION: 100% MODEL ANSWER</i>	7





FRANKENSTEIN: EXPLORATION AND AMBITION: QUESTION

Read this extract from *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* and then answer the question that follows.

This extract from letter 1 written by the explorer Robert Walton to his sister, Margaret Saville.

Six years have passed since I resolved on my present undertaking. I can, even now, remember the hour from which I dedicated myself to this great enterprise. I commenced by inuring my body to hardship. I accompanied the whale-fishers on several expeditions to the North Sea; I voluntarily endured cold, famine, thirst, and want of sleep; I often worked harder than the common sailors during the day and devoted my nights to the study of mathematics, the theory of medicine, and those branches of physical science from which a naval adventurer might derive the greatest practical advantage. Twice I actually hired myself as an under-mate in a Greenland whaler, and acquitted myself to admiration. I must own I felt a little proud when my captain offered me the second dignity in the vessel and entreated me to remain with the greatest earnestness, so valuable did he consider my services. And now, dear Margaret, do I not deserve to accomplish some great purpose? My life might have been passed in ease and luxury, but I preferred glory to every enticement that wealth placed in my path. Oh, that some encouraging voice would answer in the affirmative! My courage and my resolution is firm; but my hopes fluctuate, and my spirits are often depressed. I am about to proceed on a long and difficult voyage, the emergencies of which will demand all my fortitude: I am required not only to raise the spirits of others, but sometimes to sustain my own, when theirs are failing.

Starting with this extract, how does Shelley present the theme of exploration and ambition.

Write about:

- how Shelley presents the theme of exploration and ambition in this extract.
- how Shelley presents the theme of exploration and ambition in the rest of the novel.

[30 marks]

650 – 950 words





FRANKENSTEIN: EXPLORATION AND AMBITION: MODEL ANSWER OUTLINE

ESSAY OUTLINE

Introduction

Hook	No work of literature has done more to shape the way humans imagine science and its moral consequences than <i>Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus</i> , Mary Shelley's revolutionary and remarkably enduring tale of creation and responsibility.
Building sentences	In a straightforward—even didactic—way, the novel chronicles the devastating consequences for an inventor and those he loves of his utter failure to anticipate the harm that can result from raw, unchecked scientific curiosity.
Thesis statement	The novel not only explores Victor Frankenstein's reckless ambition but also examines the power science has to do good and cause harm.

Body paragraph 1

Topic sentence	The first character Shelley introduces to her audience is not the titular Frankenstein, but Walton, the epistolary author of the frame narrative.
Supporting sentences	What is significant, thematically, is that both Walton and Frankenstein are engaged upon journeys of exploration into the unknown, which, for both of them, have become all-consuming forces. When Walton's crew pulls Frankenstein out of the freezing waters of the North Pole, Frankenstein is evidently at the end of his journey—and it has ended in disaster. Walton recognizes a kindred spirit in him, someone who, like himself, was inspired by the stories of discovery he read as a child and whose ambition compels him to carve out a "niche in the temple" of his own. Walton is exploring the world geographically; Frankenstein is exploring the world of science, but both are men driven by powerful ambition, seeking to, as Walton puts it, "accomplish some great purpose." Walton identifies a certain fire or spirit inside Frankenstein, feeling at once that he is the "friend" he has been seeking (something which also has echoes in the hunt of the creature for a companion, later in the story). However, despite endorsements of chemistry and natural philosophy in her novel, Mary realised that science could be abused, as is certainly evident in Victor's reckless and selfish experiments, which do not account





	for their consequences. Even Victor is aware of the distinction between his selfish actions and his selfless actions. In his initial conversation with the scientific explorer Robert Walton, he refuses to share his secret knowledge: "I will not lead you on, unguarded and ardent as I then was, to your destruction and infallible misery." Victor continues: "Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow".
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Concluding sentence(s)	On his death bed at the end of the novel, Victor addresses a similar warning to Walton: "Seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed"
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Body paragraph 2

Topic sentence	Although Mary seems to be leaving the door open here for a future when selflessness and science will mutually serve each other, the novel's basic argument is that science can be as destructive as it is constructive.
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Supporting sentences	That argument about the dangers of knowledge is emphasized when the creature "found a fire ... and was overcome with delight at the warmth ... In my joy I thrust my hand into the live embers, but quickly drew it out again with a cry of pain. How strange, I thought, that the same cause should produce such opposite effects!" By her subtitle <i>The Modern Prometheus</i> , Mary is asking her reader to recall the Promethean myth, in which the Titan Prometheus steals fire (representing knowledge) from the Olympian Zeus to give to primal and pre-rational man, only to suffer the consequences of his actions. Zeus chains Prometheus, the creator of rational man, to a rock, where he is visited daily by a vulture/eagle that devours his liver/heart, only to have the same punishment repeated each day. So knowledge does cause sorrow, and fire does cause pain; and the etymology of the name "Prometheus" (Forethought) is ironic: Victor, "the modern Prometheus," lacks forethought and fails to understand the destructive consequences of his actions in constructing his creature. However, Walton is so entranced by Frankenstein's hopes and ambitions, so thoroughly understanding of his quest and sure that he is "immeasurable" as a man, that he does not recognize that the doctor also represents a moral lesson he himself would do well to follow. Through the character of Walton, Shelley indicates that, certainly, there is something admirable, and understandable, in the desire to push the boundaries of science, to explore the unexplored, and even to make one's own name in so doing. But she also uses Walton as an illustration that, in all areas of study, overstressing oneself can result in "peril" and entrapment. At the end of the story, Walton writes to his sister that he is surrounded by walls of ice from which there can be no escape.
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Concluding sentence(s)	Later, when he sees hope of retreat, he determines that he will return to England, surrendering his ambition rather than allowing himself to be destroyed. Frankenstein, by contrast, has achieved his ambition and still been destroyed by it.
<i>Body paragraph 3 (OPTIONAL)</i>	
Topic sentence	
Supporting sentences	
Concluding sentence(s)	
<i>Conclusion</i>	
Restated thesis	In conclusion, the novel explores Victor Frankenstein’s reckless ambition as well as the positives and negatives of scientific.
Summary of controlling concept	In fact, Mary Shelley’s landmark fusion of science, ethics, and literary expression does not necessarily appear designed to scare her readers into believing that all science is evil or monstrous; however, she does appear to encourage us to consider the repercussions of scientific and technological advancement. Although Frankenstein is infused with the exhilaration of seemingly unbounded human creativity, the novel also prompts serious reflection about our individual and collective responsibility for nurturing the products of our creativity and whether or not we should impose constraints on our capacities to change the world around us. This is reflected when Mary cautions against Victor’s myopic perspective that creation—bringing into existence— is all that matters;
Author’s purpose	here, Shelley appears to suggest that just because we can create, doesn’t mean we should. Appropriately, Shelley’s choice of the Gothic mode for Frankenstein helps explore Victorian fears that scientific hubris would tempt people to play God (and, perhaps, try to replace God) through the growing power of unconstrained scientific creation - a fear which lives on in more modern literary forms such as in William Golding’s nuclear war dystopian novel ‘Lord of the Flies’ and the apocalyptic future war nightmare of the killer machines in the Terminator movies.
Final thought (what idea/message can we learn?)	Thus, engaging with Frankenstein allows a broad public - and especially future scientists and engineers - to consider the history of our scientific progress together with our expanding abilities in the future, to reflect on evolving understandings of the responsibilities such abilities entail, as well as to question how much restraint and responsibility we should bear for the creations we bring into this world;





Shelley's novel calls us to be accountable for what we create and what might be destroyed in the process of creating.

MAKE SURE YOUR ESSAY CONTAINS ALL OF THESE QUALITIES

Tick these off when you have added them to your essay

- Methods - author's techniques
- Context
- Effects of the author's methods on the audience/reader
- Link to another part of the text - talk about the meaning of the connection
- Symbolism
- Themes
- Author's purpose





FRANKENSTEIN: EXPLORATION AND AMBITION: 100% MODEL ANSWER

No work of literature has done more to shape the way humans imagine science and its moral consequences than Frankenstein; or *The Modern Prometheus*, Mary Shelley's revolutionary and remarkably enduring tale of creation and responsibility. In a straightforward—even didactic—way, the novel chronicles the devastating consequences for an inventor and those he loves of his utter failure to anticipate the harm that can result from raw, unchecked scientific curiosity. The novel not only explores Victor Frankenstein's reckless ambition but also examines the power science has to do good and cause harm.

The first character Shelley introduces to her audience is not the titular Frankenstein, but Walton, the epistolary author of the frame narrative. What is significant, thematically, is that both Walton and Frankenstein are engaged upon journeys of exploration into the unknown, which, for both of them, have become all-consuming forces. When Walton's crew pulls Frankenstein out of the freezing waters of the North Pole, Frankenstein is evidently at the end of his journey—and it has ended in disaster. Walton recognizes a kindred spirit in him, someone who, like himself, was inspired by the stories of discovery he read as a child and whose ambition compels him to carve out a “niche in the temple” of his own. Walton is exploring the world geographically; Frankenstein is exploring the world of science, but both are men driven by powerful ambition, seeking to, as Walton puts it, “accomplish some great purpose.” Walton identifies a certain fire or spirit inside Frankenstein, feeling at once that he is the “friend” he has been seeking (something which also has echoes in the hunt of the creature for a companion, later in the story). However, despite endorsements of chemistry and natural philosophy in her novel, Mary realised that science could be abused, as is certainly evident in Victor's reckless and selfish experiments, which do not account for their consequences. Even Victor is aware of the distinction between his selfish actions and his selfless actions. In his initial conversation with the scientific explorer Robert Walton, he refuses to share his secret knowledge: “I will not lead you on, unguarded and ardent as I then was, to your destruction and infallible misery.” Victor continues: “Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow” (p. 35). On his death bed at the end of the novel, Victor addresses a similar warning to Walton: “Seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed”

Although Mary seems to be leaving the door open here for a future when selflessness and science will mutually serve each other, the novel's basic argument is that science can be as destructive as it is constructive. That argument about the dangers of knowledge is emphasized when the creature “found a fire ... and was overcome with delight at the warmth ... In my joy I thrust my hand into the live embers, but quickly drew it out again with a cry of pain. How strange, I thought, that the same cause should produce such opposite effects!” By her subtitle *The Modern Prometheus*, Mary is asking her reader to recall the Promethean myth, in which the Titan Prometheus steals fire (representing knowledge) from the Olympian Zeus to give to primal and prerational man, only to suffer the consequences of his actions. Zeus chains Prometheus, the creator of rational man, to a rock, where he is visited daily by a vulture/eagle that devours his liver/heart, only to have the same punishment repeated each day. So knowledge does cause sorrow, and fire does cause pain; and the etymology of the name “Prometheus” (Forethought) is ironic: Victor, “the modern Prometheus,” lacks forethought and fails to understand the destructive consequences of his actions in constructing his creature. However, Walton is so entranced by Frankenstein's hopes and ambitions, so thoroughly understanding of his quest and sure that he is “immeasurable” as a man, that he does not recognize that the doctor also represents a moral lesson he himself would do well to follow. Through the character of Walton, Shelley indicates that, certainly, there is something admirable, and understandable, in the desire to push the boundaries of science, to explore the unexplored, and even to make one's own name in so doing. But she also uses Walton as an illustration that, in all areas of study, overstretching oneself can result in “peril” and entrapment. At the end of the story, Walton writes to his sister that he is surrounded by walls of ice from which there can be no escape. Later, when he sees hope of retreat, he determines that he will





return to England, surrendering his ambition rather than allowing himself to be destroyed. Frankenstein, by contrast, has achieved his ambition and still been destroyed by it.

In conclusion, the novel explores Victor Frankenstein's reckless ambition as well as the positives and negatives of scientific. In fact, Mary Shelley's landmark fusion of science, ethics, and literary expression does not necessarily appear designed to scare her readers into believing that all science is evil or monstrous; however, she does appear to encourage us to consider the repercussions of scientific and technological advancement. Although Frankenstein is infused with the exhilaration of seemingly unbounded human creativity, the novel also prompts serious reflection about our individual and collective responsibility for nurturing the products of our creativity and whether or not we should impose constraints on our capacities to change the world around us. This is reflected when Mary cautions against Victor's myopic perspective that creation—bringing into existence—is all that matters; here, Shelley appears to suggest that just because we can create, doesn't mean we should. Appropriately, Shelley's choice of the Gothic mode for Frankenstein helps explore Victorian fears that scientific hubris would tempt people to play God (and, perhaps, try to replace God) through the growing power of unconstrained scientific creation - a fear which lives on in more modern literary forms such as in William Golding's nuclear war dystopian novel 'Lord of the Flies' and the apocalyptic future war nightmare of the killer machines in the Terminator movies. Thus, engaging with Frankenstein allows a broad public - and especially future scientists and engineers - to consider the history of our scientific progress together with our expanding abilities in the future, to reflect on evolving understandings of the responsibilities such abilities entail, as well as to question how much restraint and responsibility we should bear for the creations we bring into this world; Shelley's novel calls us to be accountable for what we create and what might be destroyed in the process of creating.

