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Knowledge, Science and *Frankenstein*: A Study of the Romantic Ideal

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Abstract:

Frankenstein, by Mary Shelly, tells a tale about a creature, a half human half monster, created by a man called Victor Frankenstein, who in his pursuit of scientific discovery, creates something horrific and then abandons it, terrified by its grotesque appearance. The monster sets out to destroy its creator as it sees him as the reason for all of its miseries who fails to realise that his actions might have repercussions. *Frankenstein* was published in 1818, during a time when science and scientific curiosity was gradually taking precedence over religion. People viewed science as a force which challenged the roots of religion and tried to answer questions which weren't meant to be answered. Moreover, after the discovery of electricity and the various experiments carried out by scientists upon dead animals at the time, trying to resurrect them, the occult belief of being able to use science to defy the laws of nature grew more popular. This conflict also gave birth to a genre known as the "gothic fiction", a blend of horror, mystery and science, which began in the late 18th century. In this paper, I make an attempt to read *Frankenstein* from the perspective of science and society, paying special emphasis upon the character of Victor Frankenstein and his aspirations of scientific discovery through the creation of life, his failures and their repercussions. I attempt to make an objective study about the intentions of Victor regarding his creation and the use of science for good or for evil.

Keywords: scientific curiosity, gothic fiction, religion, science and society.

Introduction:

"The world was to me a secret which I desired to divine. Curiosity, earnest research to learn the hidden laws of nature, gladness akin to rapture, as they were unfolded to me, are among the earliest sensations I can remember." (Shelley, 26)

These are the musings of the protagonist of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, Victor, at the time, a thirteen year old boy, who was fascinated by science and the burning desire to learn

and unravel the mysteries of life and its creation. Victor Frankenstein was a brilliant student who studied at the University of Ingolstadt, where his interest in the field of chemistry grew to an extent that he was obsessively engulfed by it, neglecting almost every other aspect of his life, including his family. At that very tender age, Victor showed interest in the works of Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus and Albertus. Although most of their works has been disregarded by modern fields of science, they remain key figures of inspiration for Victor, due to their fixation with alchemy and the secret to the creation of life. As M. Walden, Victor's beloved professor puts it:

“The ancient teachers of this science...promised impossibilities, and performed nothing”
(Shelley, 36)

M. Walden, thus, gave nods to the vision and ideas of the ancient teachers related to the field of chemistry, while enlightening Victor with newer paths of science and natural philosophy for him to study. Victor Frankenstein represented the Romantic curiosity of science and the occult belief that life could be created with the help of electricity. Guided by his professor at Ingolstadt, Victor devoted his entire time trying to unearth the deepest secrets of chemistry and alchemy, almost to a point of isolation and irate obsession:

“Two years passed in this manner, during which I paid no visit to Geneva, but was engaged, heart and soul, in the pursuit of some discoveries which I hoped to make.” (Shelley, 39)

Victor's obsession to make a breakthrough in the field of science renders him incapable of paying attention to his own physical and mental health and fails to realise that he didn't see or write to any of his family members in over two years. Instead, he spent his days learning and experimenting, and his nights, by stealing limbs of dead bodies from a graveyard, sewing the together in his pursuit of creating the perfect being. With extreme dedication, he eventually succeeds in discovering the secret of giving life, much to his astonishment and delight:

“After days and nights of incredible labour and fatigue, I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation of life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter.” (Shelley, 41)

But his delight doesn't last long as he observes the horror that he has created. Out of disgust and anguish at the grotesque appearance of the monster, Victor abandons his creation and storms out of the room. This is a crucial moment in the narrative as most of the conflicts arise from this point forward. The intentions of Victor are also at question here as he has created

something without giving any prominence to its repercussions. Upon returning back to his laboratory, Victor doesn't find the monster in the room, which now roams freely among the human society with feelings of dejection and revenge. This dichotomy between the creator and his creation, of passion and fate are the fundamental predicaments of the text. The monster is the result of Victor Frankenstein's successful experiment, but also is a constant reminder of his failures as a life-giver and his irresponsibility, who forsakes it once he witnesses the catastrophic appearance of the fiend whom, as Victor puts it, "no mortal could support the horror of that countenance." (Shelley, 46) Shelley is clearly trying to satirize the excessive fascination over science and the desire to uncover secrets of life formerly rendered unattainable by the limitations of religion. The tropes of horror and mystery runs parallel with the theme of science and the quest for knowledge, keeping true to the Romantic ideals of similar notions prevalent in the literary circles of the age. Superstitions around science and its utility, for good and for evil, was a subject of popular belief and debate during the time and *Frankenstein* was a crucial representative text of such ideas. The man, Victor Frankenstein, was described as the "modern Prometheus" by Shelley for his desire to play God which results in his eventual downfall. I shall return to the text shortly and try to explore the intentions of Victor behind his creation of the monster, but before that, we must have a brief outlook into the society and the literary conventions in which *Frankenstein* was created, from the perspective of scientific growth, in order to comprehend things clearly.

1.1 Gothic Fiction and the Romantic:

Frankenstein, first published in 1818, owes a great deal to the scientific progress and discoveries about electricity at the time, for its creation. Late 18th century scientists like Luigi Galvani and Alessandro Volta were experimenting with the possibilities of electricity and it was a popular belief by the turn of the 19th century that the dead could be brought back to life with the help of electricity. It is also popularly believed that *Frankenstein* was inspired when Mary Shelley spent an evening with the poets Byron, P.B. Shelley, her husband, and John Polidori on the shores of Lake Geneva in 1816. They were supposed to write something 'supernatural'. Polidori wrote *The Vampire*, published in 1818, a story which started a long line of vampire tales in English. (Routledge, 187) Theodore Ziolkowski, in *Science, Frankenstein and Myth* remarks that Shelley listened to conversations between Byron and her husband about the latest scientific theories concerning the "principle of life" and the possibility of creating a life by electricity. This romantic fusion of 'science' and 'horror' characterises *Frankenstein*, as it attempts to blend elements of science, mystery and the

pursuit of knowledge together, and give a unique tale of passion, digression and revenge; a peculiar yet striking take on the genre of the “Gothic novel” – a form which concentrated on the fantastic, the macabre and the supernatural: with haunted castles, specters from the grave and wild landscapes. (Routledge, 185) The form was immensely popular during the late 18th century till the early 19th century, inaugurated by Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764) and popularised by works like William Beckford’s *Vahtek* (1786), Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Shelley’s father, William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794)*

Victor Frankenstein creates the monster which is a result of his enthusiasm to discover the secrets of life and how to reanimate a dead being back to life with the use of electricity. The monster he creates is disturbingly hideous and much larger compared to a human being, which he immediately abandons, terrified by its appearance. The monster, however, an innocent, is completely lost in a world where it has no companion. The monster tries to make contact with other humans but everyone is so petrified by its appearance that they run away. This makes the monster miserable and furious, and he vows to take revenge on his creator who has given him such a deplorable existence.

The plot of *Frankenstein* is a representative of a prevalent romantic fascination: What will be consequences if the power of science and the secret to the generation of life falls at the hands of the wrong person? Victor’s intentions are contrasted with the actions of the monster, which kills almost everyone in his family in its passion for revenge. This puts a rather perplexing question in front of the reader of who the victim actually is. While, morally, we must try to sympathise with the situation of the monster and how it has to cope with the hate and cruelty it receives from the human society, the murder of an innocent child, Victor’s friend Clerval, and his wife, isn’t justifiable or acceptable under any circumstance. The monster, however, was the creation of Victor which constructs the problematic dichotomy of the narrative about morality and justice. What Shelley might be trying to hint us is that too much of an obsession with science brings no good but devastation into the society.

2. Actions and Repercussions:

What comes out of Victor’s vehement endeavor to learn about the creation of life? He creates a ghastly ‘fiend’ who seeks revenge from his creator for being the reason of his misery and abandonment. The monster is the perpetual presence of the mistakes and their repercussions for Victor and his reckless act of messing with the laws of nature, and also his inability to

take responsibility of the beast which he has created. The monster kills William, the little brother of Victor out of spite and hatred towards his creator for giving him such a miserable existence. Frankenstein, even after being aware of who the actual murderer of his brother was, chose not to disclose it to anyone for the fear of people not believing his eccentric tale, and the blame consequently comes upon Justine Moritz, the trusted family maid. Justine is punished with death sentence for a crime which she didn't even commit, and Victor being the witness of an innocent being charged of murder, chooses to remain silent:

“During this conversation I had retired to the corner of the prison room, where I could conceal the horrid anguish that possessed me. Despair! Who dared talk of that? The poor victim, who on the morrow was to pass the awful boundary between life and death, felt not, as I did, such deep and bitter agony.” (Shelley, 73)

Even though any argument cannot justify the cold-blooded murders committed by the monster, we really must raise questions on the moral conscience of Victor, who chose to remain silent during the trial and punishment of Justine. Remorse and despair takes over as the prevalent tones of the narrative as Victor now begins to realize the recklessness of his passions:

“...I ardently wished to extinguish that life which I had so thoughtlessly bestowed.” (Shelley, 79)

The living presence of the monster was the unceasing reminder for Frankenstein of his failures as a life-giver, his mistakes and the consequences of his irresponsibility, as he blames himself for all of his miseries:

“Justine died, she rested; and I was alive” (Shelley, 77)

If this wasn't enough, the monster murders Henry Clerval, a dear friend of Victor and Elizabeth, his wife, at the night of their wedding, keeping true to its promise:

“It is well, I go; but remember, I shall be with you on your wedding night.” (Shelley, 152)

Frankenstein's childhood curiosity for science and his extreme pursuit of knowledge has led to his misery and eventual demise. Frankenstein, the man, represents the romantic fascination of science and the superstitions surrounding it and Shelley is clearly trying to show the possible dire consequences of such ardent fixation.

The character of Henry Clerval has been placed in complete contrast to Victor, who doesn't share much of his interest of natural science but is more interested in the Oriental languages such as the Persian, Arabic and 'Sanskrit'. Clerval falls victim of the careless actions of Victor and the recurring question so fiercely debated in the Romantic age emerges over the surface once again – Can science be used for evil if fallen at the hands of the wrong person? Sanders reflects on Frankenstein, the man, as "Frankenstein's enterprise is punished, but not by a jealous heaven; his sufferings is brought upon him by a challenge to his authority on the part of the creature that he has rashly made." (TSOHOEL, 351) *Frankenstein* is not just a mythological or psychological horror, but is a fantastical speculation on the society and the changes being brought up by the influence of science.

2.1. The Monster – A Study:

In order to fully comprehend the magnitude of Victor's negligence and irresponsibility towards his creation, we must take the perception of the monster into consideration as well. After Victor lost his brother William at the hands of the 'daemon' which he's created, and after witnessing the death of Justine, the family maid, who was falsely accused of murder, he was engulfed by grief, anger and repentance, and sets out towards the icy, isolated valley of Chamounix, where, to his horror and abhorrence, he encounters the monster. The monster tries to reason with him by telling him it's a side of the story and requesting Victor to create a female companion. As the story of the monster unfolds, we learn about the hardships and rejections faced by the monster which is forced to survive in a place totally alien to it. Because of its disgusting appearance, people are petrified whenever they come across the monster and physically abuse it, which intensifies the rage and hatred of the monster for its creator. After finding refuge in a little shed built against a cottage where the De Lacey family lives, the monster learns to speak by eavesdropping into the conversations of the family. He finds three books; *Paradise Lost*, a volume of Plutarch's *Lives*, and the *Sorrows of Werter*. The monster learned a lot about human emotions from these literary classics, but probably the most important text it found, in the pocket of Victor's dress, which it took from his laboratory, was the journal that consisted of Victor's studies before the creation of the monster. The monster learned from the journal about the secret of his creation and wanted Victor to make a female companion for him. Victor reluctantly conforms to his demand but destroys the creature halfway through the process, repulsed by its ugliness, infuriating the monster further. Out of rage, the monster murders Victor's beloved friend Henry Clerval and his wife, Elizabeth:

“What then become of me? I know not; I lost sensation and chains and darkness were the only objects that pressed upon me.” (Shelley, 178)

Mary Shelley, by choosing to present the perspective of the monster by interrupting the main framework of the story, for six chapters, confirms that she wanted us to comprehend and analyse the situation from both the outlook of Frankenstein and his monster, and have a clear, rational and objective judgment of it. Theodore Ziolkowski reflects that “Frankenstein’s creation is not evil in itself but has been made that way by society”. The monster only wanted to learn about human society and have some company, but upon being ostracized by his master, chooses the path of evil. Shelley shows in these chapters how mindless exploitation of science can prove to be a destructive force of nature, which has ruined the life of Victor Frankenstein.

2.2 Robert Walton – Reincarnation of Frankenstein

After the story of Victor and the monster comes to a close, the novel moves out of the narrative-within-a-narrative-within-a-narrative frame to where it began, the North Pole, where Robert Walton and his crew were carrying out their expedition. The character of Walton can be read as being the representative of the scientific fervor of the Romantic age, and also as a metaphorical reincarnation of Frankenstein, the man. Walton and his crew are in an expedition of the North Pole in the quest of uncovering some scientific mystery and truth. He was lonely and isolated from human society and had a constant desire for a friend, which arrived in the form of Victor Frankenstein. This constant pursuit of knowledge and scientific truth characterized the Romantic ideal, represented by the clash of two generations of basically the same man. The influence of Coleridge’s *The Rime of Ancient Mariner* was immense in the creation of *Frankenstein*, which was most evident in the characters of Walton and Victor. The sailor of Coleridge was a man of indomitable desire, mystery and guilt, with the narrative of the poem being replete with magic realist elements; all characteristics which can be associated with Walton and Victor, further accentuating the Romantic desire for discovering the unknown. In the second letter to his sister Margaret, Walton assures her:

“I am going to unexplored regions to ‘the land of mist and snow’; but I shall kill no albatross...” (Shelley, 10)

Victor, after looking at the monster he has created, rushes out of his laboratory in an attempt to escape reality and ease the load of guilt and anxiety from his shoulders through physical exhaustion. He didn't have any clear destination and felt like the old sailor of Coleridge:

“Like one, on a lonesome road who,
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And, having once turned round, walk on,
And turns, no more his head;
Because he knows a frightful friend
Doth close behind him tread.” (Shelley, 47)

The parallels drawn between the characters of Victor and Robert are conspicuous as Shelley tries to emphasize that it wasn't only Frankenstein or his undying desire of knowledge which resulted in the creation of the monster, but it was the characteristic of the age, as indicated by the persistence of the pursuit of knowledge and truth by Robert Walton. Maurice Hindle sheds light on the issue of science and the Romantic age and its impact upon the creation of Frankenstein as:

“Without doubt this was an exciting period which saw not only a mushroom growth in scientific experimentation and discovery, but at the same time a general desire by an increasingly powerful and commercially minded middle class to hear what the new science, and especially chemistry, had to say to them about their new world. For it must be remembered that the period we are talking of was one of phenomenal transformation in the production and social structures of English society – in short the transformation we call the ‘industrial revolution’. As in all times of change, people wanted answers, and they looked to science for them.”

3. The Chase:

After the death of Frankenstein, the monster pays him one last tribute on the ship of Robert. This was a crucial point in the narrative as the three dominant tropes of the novel – the creator, his creation and the reincarnation of the creator, were present in the same frame. This raises a few rather perplexing question in the minds of the reader – why didn't the monster choose to kill Victor and get the revenge it so direly pursued for the desolate existence it was

bestowed? Why did the monster choose to run away from Victor when he was physically far superior to any human and could've easily killed him with its bare hands? We realise that the monster needed Victor alive to have a purpose in his otherwise cursed and meaningless existence. Instead of killing him, the monster killed everyone he loved to make him empathize with its loneliness. Victor, on the other hand, ceased having any purpose in his life after the death of everyone who was dear to him. He devoted the rest of his life chasing the monster. In a way, both Victor and the monster were essential for each other; the monster was the constant reminder for Victor of his failures and the consequences of his frantic scientific endeavours, which he has been chasing to rectify ever since, literally and metaphorically. The notion of guilt, both for Victor and his monster, for the evil they have committed fuses together towards the end, as described in the final letter of Robert to his sister. The monster stands before the lifeless form of Victor and exclaims:

“That is also my victim! ...in his murder my crimes are consummated; the miserable series of my being is wound to its close!” (Shelley, 197)

The monster, as it becomes apparent, was just the physical iteration of the monster which was inside Frankenstein the whole time in the form of his obsession with science and the will to play God. Shelley ends the novel without any reassuring closure, with devastation and ramifications, both physical and emotional, clouding everything else, almost as if she's trying to tell us that no good can ever be achieved out of too much scientific obsession. The only consolation we as readers receive is that after beholding the destructive forces of science at the wrong hands, Robert Walton, the embodiment of Victor Frankenstein, concludes his expedition and returns home to England.

4. Conclusion:

During my extended study of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* from the perspective of science and the pursuit of scientific knowledge, a subject which was of occult debate during the Romantic period for its association with atheism and the challenges it evoked against the beliefs of Christianity, I arrive at a conclusion that the monster cannot be held entirely accountable for the murders it had committed, the psychological impact on Victor's mental and physical health and his eventual demise. The monster was an innocent which was created out of a mad scientist's unfathomable desires and was also bestowed a very lonely, miserable life. The consequences arrive not from the presence of the monster but as the repercussions of Victor's rash and irrational behaviour at the beginning. The 'real' monster, thus, was inside

of Victor Frankenstein. Shelley was clearly trying to criticize the Romantic ideal of extreme superstition and curiosity with science and its limits.

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