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“Mortals trying to be God”: A Comparative Study of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and R. L. Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

Siddhartha Sankar Bhagawati
Former Student [Master of Arts],
Department of English,
Gauhati University.

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Abstract:

Two literary pieces, namely *Frankenstein* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, are two of the most widely read works in the English literature. Both of them share similarities as in both we find scientific geniuses. In both, the execution of knowledge leads to doom. But in case of both the stories, the destruction of the protagonist was fuelled by the fact that he tried to change the natural order of things. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to discuss both the stories taking into consideration the time they were created in and why they are so famous today. The main aim, however, will be to talk about the main element common in both which is “mortals trying to be God”. This topic will be discussed taking into consideration the name and fame both the works got which has never made them obsolete and are as famous today as when they first appeared ages ago.

Keywords: *Frankenstein*, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Science, God.

Humans have never fully understood what really makes them what they are. The dissimilarities man has with the other creatures which populate the planet have forced humans to question the very reality and the true meaning of their existence. Societies and cultures throughout the ages have made sincere attempts to analyze and understand the true meaning of man’s existence and for the effort have turned to the supernatural in several instances. The existence of an omnipotent entity responsible for the creation and caring of mankind called ‘God’ and the belief in the existence of a remnant of a dead person in the form of a spirit has been a significant feature of numerous cultures. Almost every culture in the world holds a belief in reward for a life’s virtues and punishment for the sins committed during a lifetime. Several religions, including Hinduism, believe in reincarnation which means that a person comes back to the world after death in a

different body and his actions in this life will determine his next life. However these ideas are based entirely upon myths, scriptures and dictations and hence are impossible to prove and falsify at the same time.

Man’s efforts at comprehending and describing the various elements of Nature gave rise to the scientific beliefs. Science sees man as just another creature among the myriads of organisms on the earth, being just a form of intelligent primate strengthened and adapted by evolution. This fails to explain the various attributes of the human mind as well as the mysterious nature of the consciousness of an individual. Various philosophers have, throughout the centuries, attempted a discussion of the ‘individuality’ or ‘self’ or in the simplest manner, the knowledge of one’s own existence which they saw as an exclusive attribute of humans. While many experts of animal behavior today claim that the awareness of oneself is evident in several species of macaques also, it won’t be hard to realize that it is not in the complex manner prevalent in humans. If one tries to compare humans with every other fauna of the earth, the person sees that humans are not them at all. But the intelligence of man has been responsible for most of his woes as well. Exclusively human qualities like megalomania, greed, perversion and several others have caused problems in man’s civilized world as well. While these attributes have made man’s own life miserable, several other features have caused problems for Nature as well. Unlike other creatures that tend to exist in a mutual relationship with Nature, man tends to create his own ‘Nature’. Man’s cities safeguard him from natural predators and his knowledge of medicine saves his life from diseases. Now, with all these at hand, humans bring forth a conflict between scripture and science. Man attempts to change the rules of Nature. He dreams of immortality, eternal youth and a cure for all diseases. He wants to be ‘God’ himself. This particular paper will talk about this man-made conflict between the two aspects of a person’s character i.e. religious and scientific and for the effort will discuss two major 19th century fictional works, namely *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* [1818] and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* [1886]. Although both these works belong to different literary ages, one belonging to the era of Romanticism while the other being a Victorian era work, one common element conspicuous in both is the desire of scientific geniuses to change the natural and thus be ‘Gods’, an idea endeavored for a discussion here.

Mary Shelley, the renowned writer is not only famous for her own personal literary standards but she belonged to a literary background as well. She was the daughter of novelist William Godwin and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. She was the wife of the great Romantic poet P. B. Shelley till his early death in 1822. Although she did write some fine novels, she is mostly remembered for her novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* or simply *Frankenstein* [1818]. Result of a story writing competition between her, her future husband Shelley and some others, it dealt with Victor Frankenstein, a student of the University of Ingolstadt, who develops a remarkable understanding of the various aspects of the life processes in living things, the proper execution of which helps him in creating mortal life in non living matter. His desire to create a bipedal organism which resembles a human both physically and mentally and the various problems that arise in his work, leads to the birth of a monstrosity eight feet tall. The creature thus created is not only gigantic but hideous. Victor Frankenstein is taken by incredible loathing at the sight of this abomination and he desires to destroy it. However, the creature escapes before Frankenstein could carry out the desired act. What the creature sees in man's world and the treatment it meets out with in the hands of the 'civilized' humans who display terror and dislike for it, turns it into a real monster whose only aim is to bring woe and misery in the life of its creator. The story deals henceforth with the beast's nefarious acts upon the Frankenstein family and the ultimate fate both the creature and its creator meet at the North Pole.

The manner in which the story is presented by Shelley is as remarkable as the story itself. The novel is written in a story within a story manner. The reader hears about the incidents from the mouth of Frankenstein himself who recounts his life to an explorer named Captain Robert Walton. Despite being a masterpiece of English literature, the common public bears many misconceptions about the story. Many people use the name 'Frankenstein' to refer to the creature as they believe its name is 'Frankenstein' in the novel. But the readers do understand that the creature was not named in the book and the title of the book refers to the creator. The subtitle of the novel refers to the Greek figure Prometheus, who dared to defy the deities and bring fire to mankind. The book is often read and enjoyed by readers of all ages who see in it great thrill, horror and science fiction stuff. A student sees this great novel as a remarkable tale which deals with man's never ending thirst for knowledge, his desire to conquer the forces of Nature and his fear of himself or in other words the fear man feels when he sees his real image in the mirror. The appearance of the creature which was loathsome to humans can be seen as the reflection of

human society in a mirror. Victor’s refusal to create a similar female companion for the creature further infuriated it. Victor’s fear that by doing so he might lead to the creation of a race of hideous giants is seen as meaning various things in the context of the modern world. But what is remarkable about this tale is that it depicts a man who wants to be a creator of another consciousness. Humans are told from birth that all living things are created by the omnipotent God. Frankenstein wanted to play God and create his own creature. His effort only brings death and destruction for him and his loved ones.

Nearly seventy years later, a writer from Scotland publishes a story which was perhaps inspired by *Frankenstein*. Robert Louis Stevenson is not an unfamiliar name among the readers of English literature. His adventure stories, which include *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped* and its sequel *Catriona*, *The Master of Ballantrae* and *The Black Arrow* are read and enjoyed by children and adults alike. Contrary to the level of his popularity, Stevenson’s acceptance in the literary world has not been so warm. He has often been excluded from books dealing with the history of literature, which see him as writer of second class restricted to horror stories and racy juvenile literature. Although most of his works do not adhere to adult tastes, his unfinished *Weir of Hermiston* stands as a testimony to what a great writer Stevenson was gradually turning into when his life was suddenly cut short in 1894. Another of his great works is the novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* which shares many similarities with *Frankenstein*. This story also deals with a tortured scientific genius named Dr. Henry Jekyll who holds a firm belief that the mind of man is not one single piece but something which exists in duality. Although modern psychiatrists do accept the theory that the mind of man might be the abode of not only two but multiple personalities, what the Dr. Jekyll of the story believed in was that it might be possible through the use of certain drugs to make this state of the mind physically visible. Dr. Jekyll’s obsession with this idea forces him to do an experiment upon himself. He decides to ingest his created concoction himself. Doing so, he ends up giving birth to the insidious, evil and deformed human form which begins to call itself Hyde. This Hyde was fully made up of all the negative qualities of the revered doctor. All his hidden desires and fears become the chief personality traits of Hyde. This results in Jekyll living a double life in two bodies; he uses Henry Jekyll to serve mankind and live up to the respect such a man deserves in society and at the same time, his Hyde form indulges in sadistic, nefarious forms of entertainment which are prohibited for a man as revered as Dr. Jekyll. Accused of murder, Hyde starts to weigh in heavily upon

Jekyll and the doctor ends up killing himself in order to kill this Hyde which was slowly turning into a menace to society. The novella is most remarkable because of its most vivid and acceptable portrayal of the hidden aspects of the mind, the inherent duality which exists in an individual's character and as a pioneering work for the future developments in psychiatry on a topic or condition labeled as 'split personality'.

Despite the fact that both the fictional works are products of different times and standards, the common element vivid in both is the sure influence of the industrial revolution and the enlightenment. *Frankenstein*, though written and published in the era of Romanticism, exhibits many traits which would later be symbolic of Victorianism. The various technological and scientific advancements which led the path to what is the Victorian attitude towards life, finds a representation in the novel. Victor Frankenstein was not willing to accept the established ideas and hence his wish was to create a form of consciousness in a being which was created from dismembered remains of human corpses. He wanted to be a creator himself and hence in other words, a desire to be 'God' was there in him. Mary Shelley compared Victor Frankenstein with Prometheus because she saw this character of hers as a perfect model of the legendary Greek figure. Prometheus dared to defy the gods and bring fire for mankind thus bringing the wrath of Zeus upon him. Victor dared to go against the natural processes of life and death and give life to dead matter for which he suffered greatly throughout the novel. The wrath of providence fell upon him in the form of hatred of his own creation towards him. By the time he meets Captain Walton, he had lost everything he ever had and almost all of his loved ones were slain by the beast. He himself ultimately meets his end in the hands of the beast whose hatred rooted from the fact that its creator brought it to a world where it was not welcome at all.

Robert Louis Stevenson wanted to deal with the suspicion towards religious teachings and scriptures that was solidifying during his short lifetime. The honorable Jekyll was aware that how a person presents himself as to the public is not what he actually is; for certain inbuilt traits of the human animal may disrupt the order prevalent in a society. Although it is scientifically accepted today that a person's mind serves as a haven for not only two but even more than that personalities, the idea that was unique to this learned man was that it will be possible to separate these two identities to the level that even a person's physical form will start showing differences. The learned Jekyll drank up the concoction himself and he created upon himself a state where his

own body manifests itself into two separate forms. Dr. Henry Jekyll was one of those people who were full of benevolent qualities and whose vices were minimum. Because of this, Hyde was a dwarf for it was composed entirely of his vices. Jekyll started enjoying himself greatly for he now had two forms and he could do what he wanted in separate forms. But what he had done was not what he was going to get rewarded for by divinity. His own form and flesh ended up becoming an arena for the wrestling between good and evil. The ever going war between Heaven and Hell or between the divine and the damned took place in his life. Hyde was on the verge of victory as he was beginning to come out in Jekyll’s form even without the consumption of the compound. Seeing no escape from this exclusively personal predicament of his, Jekyll decides to end his life but before that decides to leave a record of his sufferings for the generous and kind Utterson to read and reflect upon.

While reading either Shelley’s or Stevenson’s work, a modern reader may not feel much more than reading works of ‘science fiction’, which is in simplest terms a work which deals with scientific incidents and scientific ideas but with those ideas which the established scientific community thinks are still not or maybe never possible. Talking about Frankenstein, we can see that the story’s most important element, which is to create a form of ‘artificial consciousness’, has been the hallmark of a number of speculative stories and comic books. In a similar manner, Stevenson’s story gave rise to a wide variety of tales and movies, which looked to delve upon the mind and its mysteries in the manner of Jekyll. But what has to be talked about when we are discussing them is that both the works dealt with common men with great and to a level, extraordinary understanding of the scientific theories well established during their times. What resulted from their experiments was fantastic and mind blowing, yet with a touch of the grotesque. Both the men wanted to be creators, but ended up creating abominations. Their efforts did not reflect the creation of God but the conspiracy of the Devil. The desire to be God led to doom for both.

What has been talked about in the present discussion deals with the problems faced by humanity when it tried to access knowledge about its own origins, its processes and the possible ways in which the inevitable could be changed. Although man’s knowledge and understanding has brought many changes in his life and lifestyle, the dependence upon the divine has never been degenerated. A chief reason for man’s desire to be religious and devout is his inability to

understand what actually life is and where actually it goes to after an individual has died. The ‘consciousness’ of humans is of such nature that it is beyond the ability of the best dictionaries ever to give an all engulfing definition of it. Death strikes our relatives and loved ones every day. It is a part of our existence. However, we do not know what it feels like to be dead and a what sort of existence, if any, succeeds death. If nothing exists after death, then it is not possible for a living, thinking person to picture the ‘eternal oblivion’ that will be after death. Along with it, a religious man holds a fear in his heart of sinning and getting punished for it. Even the most scientific of minds cannot escape these fears. In the background of an existence of this sort, both Shelley and Stevenson created immortal characters that rejected most of the prevalent teachings and decided to create a novel object on their own. Frankenstein desired to create a monstrous humanoid which served to rectify his idea that consciousness does not go away with a being’s demise and there might be ways in which a dead person’s consciousness may be passed into another body and on the other hand, Dr. Jekyll wanted to prove that a duality in humans helps in the creation of civilization as man needs to repress his feral desires in order for a culture to flourish and certain drugs may harbor the ability to allow this mental duality to present itself in a physical form. But, what can be seen that both the men went too far with their creations and dared to challenge the natural order of things and were punished justly.

Although ages have passed since Mary Shelly and Robert Louis Stevenson have left the world of the living, the relevance of their masterpieces talked here has never declined. *Frankenstein* can be read today with the present problems and difficulties in mind. Its greatness, even after two centuries of its first appearance, has been accepted by students, scholars and the common men alike. The monster can be seen as a reflection of man himself who feels confused in this world and his efforts to survive its brutality. Victor Frankenstein can be seen as a person who tries to understand this world and wishes to change its harsh realities. Likewise, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* presents the reader with the question of how much does he know himself or if he fully understands all his desires. We see men who are respected and idealized in society commit heinous acts. We see this every day. Stevenson was thus one of the first to understand that we can never understand the true aspects of the mysterious human mind. These are topics which will be discussed and dealt with till the extinction of the human race.

“Mortals trying to be God”: A comparative Study of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and R. L. Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

To conclude, we can say that both Mary Shelley and Robert Louis Stevenson were much ahead of their times who saw that science and scripture would one day be opponents to each other and certain individuals may lead the front as their characters did.

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