

Frankenstein: Adventures of Gothicism with the Wings of Science

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Abstract—Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein offers an exceptionally fascinating insight into scientific issues of the day. Though intended as a ghost story where Mary was commenting on her own experiences rather than designing a manifesto for the future, it became the cornerstone of a new genre called “Science Fiction”. In the novel she employs the concept of science gone mad as well as a crossover theme of science versus nature. To say, it is the story of a scientist named Victor Frankenstein who is one of the representative figures of modern scientists who created monster due to his excess focus in the quest of scientific knowledge but at last he lost the control over his own creation. He was over curious to learn the hidden law of nature due to his fervent love for science. In the novel he seeks to create something that will address the flaws of the world, and in doing so makes those flaws even more difficult to overcome. It can be said that through him Mary presented a critique of the world so much influenced with science, a world which do not even bother about the consequences of their aimless desires. It can clearly be stated that Frankenstein is in a way Mary’s question to the thoughtless development of modern science. Through my paper I will be discussing that though the result of Victor’s quest symbolized everything that seems bad or frightening about science but a closer look at the story shows that it was the not mad technological monster that was responsible for the upheaval but it was Victor. In other words, it is not the lifeless technology that is responsible for its adverse side but it is its very own creator who is responsible for it.

Keywords- Science Fiction, Gothic, Frankenstein, Alchemy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Frankenstein written by Mary Shelley tells the tale of a man obsessed with creating life, but then abandoning that life once it breathes. During the times when the novel was written even the thought of raising the dead would have made the average reader wince in disbelief and terror. So, one could very well visualize the horror that Shelley created on the faces of her readers. It can be said that scenes like Victor wandering the streets of Ingolstadt or the Orkney Islands after dark on a search for body parts were purposefully designed to evoke from the reader a feeling of dread for the characters involved in the story. And this purpose was fully achieved by Shelley as her very friend Lord Byron ran screaming from the room when he heard Frankenstein’s story for the first time.

It can be said that Frankenstein is Mary’s question to the thoughtless development of modern science. The whole novel is about scientific ambition of the protagonist. It is said that one of

the most important quest of scientific aspect is the quest of new kind of creation. But it is seen that most of the scientists are unknown about how their invention will be resulted at last. They are thoughtless about the further coming danger and destructions of science. Victor Frankenstein the main protagonist of Shelley’s Frankenstein is one of the representative figure of modern scientists who created monster due to his excess focus in the quest of scientific knowledge but at last he lost the control over his own creation. Rather the text shows Victor Frankenstein is compelled to lose his own family members and his own creation became the very cause of his own destruction. In other words, in the novel his quest for absolute knowledge and power has ended in his own destruction. Text shows that he was over curious to learn the hidden law of nature due to his fervent love for science, and this very curiosity shapes his course of action in the novel.

II. ORIGIN of SCIENCE FICTION

Brian Aldiss, himself a writer of science fiction, amongst others identified Frankenstein as ‘the Origin of the Species’ of science fiction. Victor’s education as a man of science, and his subsequent experiment with the creature, demonstrates how the novel establishes distinct kinds of experimental investigation into the meaning of life. In its representation of the creature’s creation through the reanimation of disparate dead body parts, the novel is clearly about science.

Moreover, in the first chapter of his own narration, Victor Frankenstein regards his engagement with science as the ‘genius that has regulated his fate’. (the term used in the eighteenth century to describe both the physical sciences such as chemistry and physics and also the life sciences, biology and zoology)

III. INFLUENCE of ALCHEMY in VICTOR’S LIFE

From his very childhood Victor was enamored by alchemy. But as time passes he leaves alchemy to take up enlightenment science- chemistry and anatomy especially. As one traces this move, one can clearly see the history of the scientific revolution, and the Enlightenment, being played out in miniature.

It can be seen with her powerful pen Shelley captures the whole story of how Victor moved forward towards his own

doom. On a rainy day setting on the shores of Lake Geneva, in France, he idly picks up a book- a ‘volume of the works of Cornelius Agrippa’, a German alchemist of the sixteenth century. Agrippa’s books were out of print during those times because of the nothingness that they contained. But Victor found the book interesting. He himself said that his engagement with Agrippa brought a new light upon his mind. Many a times he was told by his instructor as well as his father that Agrippa’s work nothing but sad trash but according to Victor Agrippa’s views had been ‘exploded’ as chimerical, which is to say, fanciful and inaccurate. Instead he feels that they had been replaced by the ‘real and practical’ knowledge of ‘a modern system of science’. Nonetheless, Victor remarks that Agrippa warmed his imagination and perhaps says, the train of my ideas...received the fatal impulse that led to his ruin (Shelley, 24). Disobeying his father, Victor continued to read avidly in the works of alchemists when he returned home to Geneva, adding the works of Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus to those of Agrippa.

Later in the novel Victor declares that he has become a ‘disciple’ of Albertus Magnus, a Dominican friar and master of alchemy. Like Albertus, Victor soon entered with the greatest diligence into the search of philosopher’s stone and the elixir of life. Afterwards his focus shifted to finding a cure for all diseases, to say banishing diseases from the human frame and to render man invulnerable to any but a violent death.

His ambitions become inflated when he leaves home for university, where he becomes enamored of the grandiose dreams of Renaissance magicians like Paracelsus and Cornelius Agrippa. One of his teachers dismisses this fascination with frank contempt, but another points out that modern scientists are beginning to achieve results even more marvelous than those which the optimists and charlatans of earlier eras had claimed. Victor then makes his crucial intellectual move, turning his attention to science -- specifically to the science of electricity the ‘vital fluid’ whose implications in the mechanics of muscular movement had recently been demonstrated -- as a possible means to achieving an unprecedented victory over the greatest of all tyrants: death.

IV. VICTOR’S TURN to MODERN SCIENCE

Further, the text shows that in spite of innumerable attempts Victor was neither able to raise ghosts and devils nor was he able to find the philosopher’s stone and it was then that he became disillusioned with alchemy. And now it was the new science- or the ‘science of natural philosophy’ that caught his attention. Firstly, he was fascinated by the demonstration of the

vacuum by use of an air pump (an experiment which proved that air was matter) and secondly the vivid lesson accorded by the effects of lightening on a tree outside the family house in Belrive. Further his discovery of electricity was the last stroke which completed the overthrow of Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, and Paracelsus.

Waldman, Victor’s teacher, was an important figure in Victor’s science. He is an unusual ‘man of science’, a generalist in a period of increasing specialization, an historian of science in a period consumed by a desire for the new and the innovative.

Under Waldman’s influence, Victor becomes a model student, applying himself with avidity to his studies, improving rapidly. He realized his caliber as he says, my ardour was indeed the astonishment of the students; and my proficiency, that of the masters (Shelley, 33).

Though Victor shifted his focus towards science but a close reading shows that Victor has not abandoned alchemy or magic, but has supplemented it. In other words, the ‘elixir of life’ is not forgotten, but is now pursued by another route, that of modern scientific chemistry and physiology. His studies, he comments, take him beyond the limits of agreed knowledge, and this thirst for discovery lures him on. Indeed, it is at this stage, ‘animated by an almost supernatural enthusiasm’, that Victor’s enquiry takes on a new dimension. His enquiry now expands to tackle the ‘bold’ question: ‘Whence...did the principle of life proceed?’ (Shelley, 33), which he begins to approach through the ‘science of anatomy’. He was told that to examine the causes of life, one must first have recourse to death.

Further, the text shows that in pursuing the origins of life amongst the manifestations of death, Victor has recourse to graveyards and charnel houses (repositories of bones). We may picture him as the grave-robbing anatomist, fearlessly fossicking amongst recently putrefying corpses of the recently buried (Ellis, 150). In this way, Victor seems to be turning away from enlightenment science, which valued the kinds of open and public knowledge. His experiment was undertaken at night, out of sight and in secret. But although Victor walks on the dark side of science, he himself continues to experience enlightenment.

Armed with the ‘astonishing...power’ of ‘bestowing animation’ or life, Victor sets about ‘the creation of a human being’, the accomplishment of which would be the sublime expression of his sublime mastery. ‘my imagination was too much exalted by my first success to permit me to doubt of my ability to give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man (Shelley, 35).

These words of Victor clearly show the curiosity and the sense of enlightenment that Victor was experiencing.

Undoubtedly, in his urge for searching the impossible, he neglects the passing of time and seasons, and even forgets his precious family. Moreover, while completing his experiments in resurrection he becomes withdrawn as well as intellectually isolated. And ultimately this process reaches a frightful climax when the work is finally complete. An eight foot tall patchwork man which he has made has only to open a cold eye for Victor to be suddenly overcome by repulsion at what he has done. He says:

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavored to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips (Shelley, 38).

And so, repelled by the mere appearance, the inevitable imperfection, of his work, Frankenstein rejects the creature utterly. On the other hand, the creature was completely unaware about his creator as well as about the world in which he was born. Unable to understand the catastrophe he goes away. Further, the text shows that when the monster departs in confusion, Victor gladly reverts to type, renewing his relationships with his friend and his family whom he had earlier rejected. Where he deserted his very own creation, the one whom he had given life, the one who is wandering all alone in confusion his own family support and helps him to recover. But no one thinks about the helpless creature.

V. THE STRUGGLE of the REJECTED ONE

We see that *the creature is bitter and dejected after being turned away from human civilization, much the same way that Adam in Paradise Lost was turned out of the Garden of Eden. One difference, though, makes the monster a sympathetic character, especially to contemporary readers is that in the biblical story, Adam causes his own fate by sinning. But here his creator, Victor, however, causes the creature's hideous existence, and it is this grotesqueness that leads to the creature's being spurned. Only after he is repeatedly rejected does the creature become violent and decides to seek revenge* (Mellor,106).

The novel shows that in the creature's earliest days of life, he struggles with the concept of humanity and what it is to be human. His new and unexplained existence places him in an introspective and indefinite state of inquisitiveness. As he explains to Frankenstein in their first meeting,

I admired virtue and good feelings and loved the gentle manners and amiable qualities of my cottagers, but I was shut out from intercourse with them, except through means which I obtained by stealth, when I was unseen and unknown, and which rather increased than satisfied the desire I had of becoming one among my fellows (Shelley,93).

It can be said that he is imbued with conflicting desires. He idealizes the emotions and interactions of the cottagers, yet is unsure of his place among them. He very cleverly utilizes his observations of the cottagers to create his own ideals of humanity. The readers can clearly notice that at this point in the novel, the creature still reflects a kind of kinship with those he is observing. It would seem that the creature views other people as closer to God, not simply because of his own isolation, but because he witnesses their apparent ability to function in a world of God. He desire to be accepted and assimilated is apparent when he speaks further of his feelings towards the cottagers. He says,

The more I saw of them, the greater became my desire to claim their protection and kindness; my heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures; to see their sweet looks directed towards me with affection was the utmost limit of my ambition (Shelley,102).

The creature reflects in these words a sense of simplistic desire, uncorrupted as yet by the malevolent and reactionary forces that will later come to shape his existence. His desire to be a part of the cottagers' lives, to have them accept him and even love him, illustrates a tangible connection felt between the creature and the rest of humanity. The creature goes on to say *I required kindness and sympathy; but I did not believe myself utterly unworthy of it* (Shelley,102). It can be said that throughout *Frankenstein*, knowledge of the existence of a creator has a crippling effect on the creature as he struggles to reconcile his own perception of himself with his maddening desire for divine approval and acceptance. The creature believes himself capable and even worthy of both emotional and psychological reciprocation and, by extension, capable of existing in harmony with the rest of humankind.

Besides his hideous appearance the creature was completely humble and he tried his best to be polite and kind with others. In an attempt to further his capacity for human interaction and thereby define his place in society, the creature educates himself on morals and vices. He says,

I read of men concerned in public affairs, governing or massacring their species. I felt the greatest ardor for virtue rise within me, and abhorrence for vice, as far as I understood the signification of those terms, relative as they were, as I applied them, to pleasure and pain alone (Shelley, 100).

The creature develops his own sense of morality without the influence of religion or the creator mythology. His standards are human and reactionary, based solely on the senses of "pleasure and pain", yet they are crucial and significant to his development. As he wrestles with ideas of right and wrong, good and evil, he comes closer to sating his desire for acceptance and integration into society. Of the cottagers, the creature goes on to say,

Such was the history of my beloved cottagers. It impressed me deeply. I learned, from the views of social life which it developed, to admire their virtues and to deprecate the vices of mankind (Shelley,98).

This passage signifies one of the few positive influences of humankind on the creature. Through their unknowing example, the cottagers serve the creature as teachers, imparting a sense of morality and virtuous behavior through simple human interaction.

It is evident from these examples from *Frankenstein* that the creature is capable of learning moral and virtuous behavior without the influence of spiritual or divine proclamation. The presence of a bible or other religious scripture is conspicuously absent from his education, yet he is capable of developing a thoroughly structured sense of morality and ethics. His "*ardor for virtue*" and "*abhorrence for vice*" is a basis for strong intellectual development, as well as being instrumental in positive human relations, the end goal of the creature's self-education.

The sudden and drastic change in the creature arises with the discovery of Frankenstein's journal. Upon learning of his "creator" and the foul circumstances surrounding his creation, the creature proclaims,

Everything is related in them which bears reference to my accursed origin; the whole detail of that series of disgusting circumstances which produced it is set in view; the minutest description of my odious and loathsome person is given, in language which painted your own horrors and rendered mine indelible. I sickened as I read. 'Hateful day when I received life (Shelley,101)!

This is a strong departure from the hopeful and optimistic creature that arose earlier in the text. When confronted with the sordid details of his own creation, as well as the flatly horrific comments of Frankenstein, the creature regresses quickly into a negative and self-deprecating appraisal of himself.

From this moment forth, the creature abandons his sense of morality that was so carefully developed over time and becomes fixated instead upon the beliefs of his creator. In other words, when the "Frankenstein monster" realizes how he came to be and is rejected by mankind, he seeks revenge on his creator's family to avenge his own sorrow.

To summarize, he was rejected by his creator at the moment of his first awakening, and was subsequently reviled by everyone who caught sight of him; even his desperate attempt to make a home with a blind man had inevitably come to nothing. It was, he claims, the madness born of this rejection which led him to kidnap a child, and the revelation that the child was the brother of his creator that drove him to murderous frenzy. In consequence of all this the monster demands that a companion be made for him, given that he is too repulsive to be accepted into the community of men.

VI. CREATURE'S DEMAND FOR A COMPANION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Victor initially agrees to this request, and sets out to accomplish it on a remote islet in the Orkneys, but he is no longer insulated by obsession, and becomes terrified of the thought that he is giving birth to an entire race of monsters whose co-existence with mankind will be -- to say the least -- problematic. This prospect causes him to abandon the work, and no immediate repercussions ensue. In time, though, the monster sets out to exact his revenge, not upon Victor himself, but upon his friends and loved ones. He does not even spare Elizabeth whom Victor married. Instead, he kills her on her wedding night. And once again we see Victor isolated from the rest of humankind.

Undoubtedly we can say that Victor is responsible for his own behavior, and ultimately for the deaths of those he loves. His struggle is not with his Creator, but with his own ego. Out of this first assumption comes the primary theme of the novel that is *with knowledge comes personal responsibility; the denial of responsibility leads to tragic outcomes* (Nocks,138). If Victor would have taken care of his responsibility and would not have judged the creature by his hideous appearance than the circumstances would have been different. He should have accepted his creation and should have abandoned it. This shows it was not our mad technological monsters that made the world the way it is and murdered so many of the things which we ought to hold dear; it was us.

The creature's obsession is fully realized in the last chapter of Frankenstein. Upon the death of Frankenstein, the creature 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,176)! In this statement, the creature expresses his final release from the cycle of death and revenge that had dominated his pursuit of Frankenstein. In the eyes of the creature, the creator is truly dead and only with the death of the creator is the creature free to once again determine his own fate. Even in choosing death for himself, an end left open to the reader's own discretion, the creature has finally realized a freedom from uncontrollable forces and his ability to decide his own destiny without the limitations of unattainable spiritual dogma.

VII. CONCLUSION

Victor's story is essentially that of a man who once had 'everything' but lost what he had through desiring even more. The 'everything' which he had includes material goods, but its most precious aspects are friendships and love, embodied in his relationships with Henry Clerval and his cousin Elizabeth. But unsatisfied with this 'everything' he had he goes on to take on the role of God. He decides to give life to a creature. And thus he was rightly punished for daring to usurp the divine prerogative of creation. A closely-related interpretation regards Victor Frankenstein as an archetypal example of a man destroyed by his own creation.

In a way it can be said that it is the story of a scientist who seeks to create something that will address the flaws of the world, and in doing so makes those flaws even more difficult to overcome. Such acts of creation are most obviously pursued by scientists but this desire to remake the world over in our own image exists in each one of us. This is the fundamental appeal of science fiction: As a genre it argues that we are each capable of creating

the world anew. We are each capable of planting a new Eden and rewriting the history of humanity. And the fundamental moral of science fiction is that if we were actually to do so, that brave new world would be as frightening and as hostile to any truly humanistic impulse as was Huxley's world or the world depicted in Brazil. We have not in fact progressed very far if at all, and if we attempt to create a new world it will simply replicate and possibly exaggerate the flaws of past worlds rather than ameliorate them. Which is not to say that within specific works of science fiction characters do not come to a realization of the limits of human endeavor. And similar was the case of Victor Frankenstein. In his childhood aspirations he unconsciously made the mistake of going beyond the scope of human endeavors and thus gave a call to his own doom.

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