

Romanticism and *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley

Many of the main ideas behind the literary movement of Romanticism can be seen in *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. Although the dark motifs of her most remembered work, *Frankenstein* may not seem to conform to the brighter tones and subjects of the poems of her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, and their contemporaries and friends, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Mary Shelley was a contemporary of the romantic poets. Despite this apparent difference, Mary Shelley was deeply influenced by the romantics, and the reader of *Frankenstein* can certainly identify a number of characteristics of romanticism in this novel. Some critics have argued that *Frankenstein* is actually more sophisticated than the prose of other romantic writers, as this novel "initiates a rethinking of romantic rhetoric" (Guyer 77). This rethinking is achieved by Shelley's engaging and simultaneously challenging the typical romantic tropes, which results in the production of a novel that is "more complex than we had earlier thought" (Goodall 19). The introduction of Gothic elements to *Frankenstein* questions the facile assumptions of romanticism, thereby redefining and contextualizing the romantic text. In short, the argument can be made that through *Frankenstein*, Shelley not only engages with Romanticism, she exceeds much of what her contemporaries were writing by taking the movement one step further.

Before discussing this aspect of Shelley's work, it is necessary to lay forth the ideological groundwork underlying Romanticism as a literary movement. The romantic period was characterized by a marked departure from the ideas and techniques of the literary period that preceded it, which was more scientific and rational in nature. Romantic poetry and prose, by contrast, was intended to express a new and visionary relationship to the imagination (Fite 17). The romantic poets were always seeking a way to capture and represent the sublime moment and experience (Fite 17), and the more personal that moment had been, the better. The speakers in many of the romantic poems, for instance, are virtually indistinguishable from the authors themselves. This is one of the ways in which Shelley, then, both embraces and simultaneously contests this particular romantic ideal. The moment which Shelley describes in *Frankenstein* is neither a moment recalled from her personal experience, such as a contemplative moment in nature, nor is the narrative voice her own, yet she is still portraying a particular quest to achieve the sublime. That quest, of course, is Victor Frankenstein's effort to create a living being out of raw material in his laboratory. It is particularly curious that this quest occurs within the confines

of Victor's private, secluded laboratory, which is unlike the natural, pastoral environments of so many romantic texts. Yet, note the nature imagery in the following line, in which Victor expresses his feelings about the undertaking in one of the important quotes from *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley : "No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success," he tells the reader, recalling the heady project in his lab. "Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through.... A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me" (Shelley 51). Victor Frankenstein is a romantic character to the extent that he reflected the romantic writers' emphasis on a new way of seeing. The romantics believed that it was individual and collective visual imagination that would create a new understanding of the world and lead to a more perfect version of human beings and the societies in which they lived. Victor is the ultimate dreamer, who is preoccupied by otherworldly concerns and unattainable ideals. In this sense, he is highly romantic.

Beyond character portrayals, however, there are several important romantic themes and ideas that are presented in *Frankenstein*. First, as this thesis statement for *Frankenstein* and Romanticism suggests, nature plays an important role in *Frankenstein*, although to the reader familiar with romantic poetry, it may seem that nature is somewhat less important or less central than the role it plays, for example, in the poetry of Percy Shelley, or in the romanticism examples of poetry of Wordsworth, and Coleridge. Nonetheless, from the novel's opening, the importance of the reader getting a sense of physical place is established by situating the text within a particular environment, the qualities of which will both mirror and contradict the inner states of the main characters. Victor notes that the landscape of the Orkneys and that of his native country are quite distinct. His description of the Orkneys is cold, barren, gray, and rough. In contrast, he recalls Switzerland as colorful and lively. He describes the Swiss hills in true Romanticism form as covered with verdant vines and the landscape as teeming with blue lakes that reflect the brilliant blue sky. The final comparison that he draws is between the winds of each place. In Switzerland, the winds are "but...the play of a lively infant" (Shelley 42), not the tormented sea squalls that batter the rock face of the Orkneys. It is symbolic, of course, that Victor has chosen such a barren place to create the companion for the Creature. The contrast between the two places is as stark and distinct as the differences between Frankenstein's Creature and the human world. The Creature occupies a world that is bleak, that is attacked on all sides by an unforgiving set of conditions. Victor, his family, and the De Lacys occupy a world that has beauty, even though each has had to deal with occasional harsh realities. These appropriate pairings of characters with their environments will be re-emphasized throughout the novel, and the physical qualities of the environments will provoke contemplative thought for most of the main

characters, especially Victor and the Creature.

On a more symbolic level, *Frankenstein* is clearly a novel about romantic striving against the customary boundaries or limitations placed on our existence. First, there is the obvious example of Victor Frankenstein pushing against his limitations as a human being by striving to play a God-like role by making the Creature. For Victor, it is not satisfying enough to simply study philosophy and science and proceed on to a respectable profession. He must perfect the role of the scientist by attempting to accomplish the impossible, a process which is inevitably frustrated, as it must be, by the fact that overstepping human boundaries has significant consequences. Shelley's *Frankenstein* is not a mad scientist, as his character has been reduced to over the years, but a scientist who is passionate about the primary questions and preoccupations of his time. In his Romantic quest for a scientific ideal—the perfect human—he creates a monster, who then must be held in check by other systems and institutions that humans have also created. While these institutions are more concrete and based in reality than the creation of the monster, they are equally imperfect. This novel helps the reader understand that there is no such state as perfection. Furthermore, there is no social experiment, whether based in reality or in fantasy, that will result in an ideal solution. Rather, human beings will always create imperfect institutions and inventions, and given this, must be prepared to accept responsibility and anticipate the potential consequences.

Victor Frankenstein is not the only character to strive against and challenge traditional boundaries, however. The Creature that Victor makes is engaged in his own struggle to experience sublime connection with his environment and with other living beings. The Creature makes multiple attempts to connect with other beings, especially before he realizes that he is different from them. Almost all of his efforts are in vain, however. The Creature lacks speech and obvious physical characteristics that would make him more recognizable to human beings. The pain of his multiple rejections leads him to believe that, as explained in one of the important quotes from *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, "[T]he human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union.... [I]f I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear...." (Shelley 173). This decision signals the decline of all of the major characters, and foreshadows the novel's terrible denouement. In a twist on the typical romantic text, which, if it does not end happily, ends on a thoughtful, meditative note, this novel ends with the characters having effected no significant resolution amongst themselves. They have all realized the impossibility of striving against the roles to which they have been assigned in life, and they do not seem to be able to identify any other options for themselves. While this novel is exemplary of the romantic period in that it uses a highly stylized and dramatized frame, more concerned with the realms of the fantastic than those of the real, the fantastic story

becomes an allegory for very real emotions and struggles with which romantic writers were deeply preoccupied.

What makes *Frankenstein* endure as an exemplary romantic novel is the fact that it takes on these characteristics and concerns that are so central to romantic writing and challenges the common use and treatment of them. By appropriating elements of the romantic and combining them with characteristics that are clearly gothic, Mary Shelley expanded the possibilities of both genres. She permits length self-examination without wallowing and self-preoccupation, and she allows characters to express deep desires, even if those desires are impossible to achieve. To her credit, she avoids over-philosophizing or offering her own interpretation for the reader to adopt. Instead, she creates a novel that is far more complex and sophisticated than the work of many of her contemporaries by provoking philosophical, ethical and moral questions that the reader is left to answer.

Works Cited

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