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Frankenstein

What is the chief end of man? Or, perhaps better stated, what does man’s nature believe its chief end to be? According to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, human nature aspires to more than it can attain--to glorify and elevate the self--and the endeavors that result have the potential to be wholly destructive. Shelley’s assumed protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, seems the most obvious representation of this concept; however, the reader will observe that reflections of Frankenstein are present in nearly every character in the novel and, consequently, are found in each and every individual.

After crawling aboard Robert Walton’s ship, Frankenstein quickly identifies his own reflection in the aspirations of his rescuer, and begins to recount his strange tale with a clearly stated purpose, saying, “Unhappy man! Have you drunk also of the intoxicating drought? Hear me--let me reveal my tale, and you will dash the cup from your lips!” (Shelley 29). Frankenstein then proceeds to tell of his childhood and how from, an early age, he finds himself driven by an insatiable urge to discover the “metaphysical, or in the highest sense, the physical secrets of the world” (39), further declaring that “the world to me was a secret which I desired to divine” (38). Such dreams lead him to seek out knowledge of the sciences, and youth’s imaginative desires of banishing disease and discovering everlasting life turn into a budding scientist’s desire to create life in his own image. Frankenstein readily admits that his thoughts dwelled not on wealth but on “what glory would attend the discovery” (42). Walton, the recipient of this tale, shares similar aspirations as he travels dangerous seas to discover new trade routes and achieve lasting fame. Henry Clerval, Frankenstein’s lifelong friend, likewise hopes to “become one among those whose names are recorded in story, as the gallant and adventurous benefactors of our species” (39). Like Frankenstein, both of these men yearn for knowledge that will bring them glory, yet each is ultimately deterred from his endeavors; Walton by the persistent reasoning of his men and the tale of his strange guest, Clerval by his friend’s overpowering creation. Shakespeare’s King Henry V similarly claimed to seek similar glory, stating, “If it be a sin to covet honor, I am the most offending soul alive” (*H5* 4.3.28-29). Such covetousness for glory is inherent in the nature of human beings and is a struggle from which no one is exempt. “How much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world,” counsels Frankenstein, “than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow” (Shelley 54). Such lament echoes the words of Sophocles, writing more than two-thousand years before Shelley, who observed that “man desires to be more than man, to rule his world for himself” (*OR* 290). Frankenstein’s predicament, although unique in form, has been shared in principle throughout time and culture. It is only his monster, who was consumed first by Maslow’s third need--that of love and belonging--who did not battle this innate urge for esteem, respect, and achievement.

Also present within Frankenstein and, subsequently, within other characters in the book is the depravity and baseness of humanity. Frankenstein’s monstrous offspring voices this concept well as he relates the history of his short existence to his creator, saying, “Was man, indeed, so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? He appeared at one time a mere scion of the evil principle, and at another as all that can be conceived as noble and godlike” (Shelley 122). Such sentiments echo the words of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, stating, “What a piece of work is a man! How noble in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god,” and empathizes with Sophocles’ chorus, “Man the master, ingenious past all measure past all dreams, the skills within his grasp […] but the city casts out that man who weds himself to inhumanity thanks to reckless daring” (*Ham*. 2.2.94-98; *Ant.* 77). Frankenstein is undoubtedly ingenious past all measure and godlike in his successful creation of life, yet in his response to his work, he weds himself to inhumanity. As an imperfect creator, he cruelly rejects his creation, not simply turning him out of the garden as the God of *Paradise Lost* did, but seeking to utterly destroy it. Yet why is he filled with such hate towards his own scientific triumph? Is it simply because the monster killed his family and threatened all he holds dear? Or is it, perhaps, because he sees himself reflected in the work of his hands? Frankenstein cautions his listener against the monster, saying that “he is eloquent and persuasive; and once his words had even power over my heart: but trust him not. His soul is as hellish as his form, full of treachery and fiendlike malice,” yet how easily could these words apply to Frankenstein himself (Shelley 212)? He, too, is eloquent and persuasive as he shares his tale of woe, and his words evoke the sympathy of Walton, his listener. But can he be trusted? For although he is not externally horrifying, revenge and hate rage as the fires of hell within him, and he openly admits to having betrayed the promise he made to his creation and is now pursuing its destruction. Like Dr. Jekyll’s infamous internal war between himself and his own laboratory triumph, so also does Dr. Frankenstein battle his created monster. Unlike Jekyll, however, his battle is not so black and white. Both Frankenstein and his monster desire what was right and good, each knows that his past actions were evil, yet each also allows his thirst for revenge to overcome his desire to correct his wrongs. Yes, Frankenstein does succeed in his quest to bypass the laws of nature and give life to a creature made in his image, but in doing so, he creates a nightmarish beast, equally conflicted in his longing for good and his temptation towards evil as he. Ultimately, he is indistinguishable from the beast he has created.

Victor Frankenstein is not unique in his nature. He hungers for glory in the same manner as Clerval and Walton, and he struggles with his conflicted flesh in equal measure to his monster. What is more, he does is not unique in the history of literature--from ancient Greece to Renaissance England to Romantic Britain, characters and their authors have long wrestled with the inclination of human nature. Shelley’s characterization of this self-destroyed man serves to once more remind the reader of the vulnerability and self-deceiving nature of misguided aspirations and the monstrous nature lurking within each individual.

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