

## **The Price for Knowledge**

By Matias Ahrens Dorf

In Mary Shelley's dark, gothic novel, *Frankenstein*, we see Victor Frankenstein undertake a dangerous journey to acquire a type of knowledge that may be better left untouched. Victor yearns to attain the godlike knowledge of the origins of life and how to create life. This grand scientific ambition, however, leads to disaster, for Victor ends up creating a monster. Victor's creation, in turn, undertakes his own quest for knowledge to find out who created him; like a new born baby, to gain basic knowledge of the world around him; and to achieve understanding of human society in order to gain acceptance into it. Both of these characters eventually acquire the knowledge they so greatly desired but their leads to nothing but despair and tragedy for both of them. Through this novel, Mary Shelley suggests that the seemingly noble and even divine quest for knowledge can lead to utter misery and self-destruction.

Victor Frankenstein is often compared to Prometheus, a titan in Greek mythology who created mankind and stole fire from Mount Olympus to give to humans. Like Prometheus, Frankenstein creates life and brings the power to create life to mankind, a power too dangerous for humans to wield, a power that only a god should possess. One critic describes Victor's work in the following way: "our modern Prometheus formed a filthy image to which the last step of his art was to communicate being" (John Wilson Crocker, Irish statesman and author). The gods were not pleased when Prometheus stole from Mount Olympus and, "Zeus had Prometheus bound to a mountain and sent an eagle to peck continually at his liver" (John E. Thorburn, Author). Like Prometheus, Frankenstein was also punished, for trying to create life unnaturally. However, unlike Prometheus, the agent of Frankenstein's punishment is his own creation, who kills his beloved brother, friend, and wife, leaving Victor nothing but his all-consuming lust for

revenge. As Victor laments, this “fiend had snatched from me every hope of future happiness” (Shelley 146). The fruit of Victor’s quest for knowledge proves to be his “fiendish enemy” and the pitiless instrument of his destruction (Shelley 149).

The creature, like his creator, also is a seeker after knowledge, but he may more aptly be compared to Adam, whose desire for knowledge of good and evil led to expulsion from Paradise, rather than to Prometheus. Indeed, the creature thinks of himself as the new Adam after reading *Paradise Lost* because he is the first of his kind and is in a way also banished by his creator as God banished Adam from the Garden of Eden. As the creature says about himself, “Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence” (Shelley 92). However, the creature’s creator refuses to make him an Eve to go along with him and this agonizing isolation falls the creature with a murderous hatred. The creature is constantly rejected by everyone that he comes into contact with because of his terrifying ugliness. This experience inspires him to try to learn how to be accepted into human society and even how to become human: “I longed to discover the motives and feelings of these lovely creatures” in the hope that “I should first win their favour, and afterwards their love” (Shelley 80-81). While he is observing the De Lacey the monster makes it his mission to become human by learning humans’ language, history, and culture. Maureen Noelle McLane observes, “the monster understands language to be a route to human being” and thereby suggests that the creature believes that language is the essence of humanity (Maureen Noelle McLane, Associate Professor of English at NYU). McLane points out that “He expects to use his articulate voice against their perception of his hideous form,” and with this plan in mind the creature decides to attempt to communicate with the blind De Lacey, a man unable to behold the monster’s ugliness (McLane). His plan goes well, but only at first. The two enjoy a friendly conversation but then the blind man’s children return from a long walk and

chase the creature away. The monster learns from this experience that no matter how much he talks and acts as a human would, he will never be one and humans will always reject him because of his hideous appearance. As a result, the creature grows angry and declares "everlasting war against the species" (Shelley 97). The result of the monster's quest for knowledge of how to be accepted by human society ends up being a deadly rage against all humanity.

After discovering that humans will never accept him, and after murdering Victor's brother William, the monster seeks out his creator and asks Victor to create another monster, a female, so that he may have a companion "with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being" (Shelley 104). Victor hesitates when the monster asks him for this favor but he obliges because, even though the creature has committed murder, he promises to leave all humanity alone and Victor, as his creator, feels that he owes the creature a measure of care. This request by the monster leads Victor on a new journey to attain a new kind of knowledge, one that can offer him moral guidance. In this quest Victor asks himself, not whether it is possible for him to create new life, but whether it is right for him to do so. While creating his creature's mate, Victor torments himself by contemplating all the evil that she might cause if, for example, she bears children, provokes the creature to break his promise to avoid harming humans, or herself commits atrocities against humanity. As Victor notes, "she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness" (Shelley 120). While wrestling with this moral dilemma, Victor happens to look up from the operating table at the monster and sees that "his countenance expressed the utmost extent of malice and treachery" (Shelley 121). Suddenly recognizing that creating another monster would be the pinnacle of evil, Victor rips to shreds the body of the mate

he was about to create for his creature. Victor knows that, by not creating a mate for his creature, he will provoke the unhappy and furious monster to seek vengeance. Nevertheless, Victor realizes that bringing a second, female monster into being, and thereby possibly a whole species of monsters into being, might potentially be devastating to the whole human race. Victor comes to see that, as he puts it, “my duties towards the beings of my own species had greater claims to my attention” than his duties as a creator to the monster (Shelley 161). Victor’s quest for moral understanding thus leads him to attain a measure of moral wisdom concerning his duties to humanity. Nonetheless, this wisdom does not spare him from the horrors of losing his loved ones at the hands of the monster he brought into being.

Victor and the creature he brings to life share a profound thirst for knowledge. Throughout his life, Victor sought to discover the secrets of nature by studying the works of old and new scientists and philosophers and ultimately by conducting experiments of his own. His quest for knowledge leads him, finally, to seek to unlock the greatest secret of nature, the secret of life and how to create, and this seemingly glorious discovery leads to nothing but tragedy and misery. In the aftermath of the creation of the monster, Victor does seek and attain a measure of moral understanding concerning his duties as a human being, but that wisdom does not save him from terrible suffering inflicted by his creature. The creature himself inherits a portion’s inquisitive nature, for he too seeks knowledge, above all, of human society and how to gain acceptance in it. Through his studies and his experiences, however, the creature learns that humans will never accept such a hideous monster into their society and consequently conceives a murderous hatred of all humanity. By means of her novel, Mary Shelley impresses on the reader just how gripping, intoxicating, and even ennobling the quest for knowledge can seem, but she ultimately offers the unforgettable warning that digging too deeply into the mysteries of the

universe can lead humans to experience not only the horrible pain of losing loved ones but also the unendurable pain of knowing that one has caused their loss.

## Works Cited

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