The Hazards of Science: Shelley’s Spurning of Enlightenment Thinking

In Greek Mythology, mankind once sat entirely at the mercy of the Gods. The often-forgotten subtitle of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein is “The Modern Prometheus”, which sheds a great deal of insight as to how Shelley herself perceived her legendary tale. The protagonists of both stories, Prometheus and Dr. Victor Frankenstein, go to extraordinary lengths hoping to enhance the human condition. Prometheus steals fire from the Gods and gives it to mankind, blessing them with the first piece of technology, while Victor discovers the cause and generation of life, creating a living being entirely on his own. However, each of these heroes soon discovers the horrific ramifications of their actions - Prometheus is strapped to a rock to have his liver eternally torn out by an eagle, while Victor must grapple with the responsibility of his creation, which quickly escapes his control. The underlying lesson of the Myth of Prometheus taught man to be weary of overextending his grasp when seeking knowledge and power, with Prometheus’ eternal suffering underlining the horrific consequences that this can have. Shelley uses Victor Frankenstein as a “Modern Prometheus” to repeat the lesson that mankind must be cautious in his pursuit of knowledge, for horrific consequences can and will occur should it be ignorant of this danger.

For thousands of years, the great and almighty God existed as the center of the world, providing order, hope, and a sense of purpose for the lowly humans that walked his Earth. Religion was (and still is) an impossibly powerful tool, and was used by many to bring both good and evil into this world. However, in the middle of the 18th century, God was kindly excused from his duty and replaced by a new method of thinking centered upon science and rationality. Thus began the Enlightenment, the most colossal shift in the human paradigm in the last thousand years. No longer were people concerned with God and the tenacious rules he had been impressing upon them for years. Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, condensed the Enlightenment down to two words: *Sapere aude,* which means “dare to know” (Hunt, 563). As many in the world around Shelley eagerly adopted this new perspective, she clung instead to Romantic notions, which valued emotions and nature over the “cold” pursuits of science. Shelley shares her own opinions about the conflicting nature of Romanticism and the Enlightenment through Victor; repeatedly throughout Frankenstein, Victor is relieved by his inherent affinity for nature, but is marred with troubles by the forces he has brought into play during his quest for knowledge.

The Scientific Revolution that occurred in Shelley’s time was centered upon a rational, deductive method of acquiring knowledge. The maxim that “knowledge is power” certainly would have appealed to the *philosophes* of this time, but they may not have been so keen to realize the corruption that tends to come hand-in-hand with such power. Shelley makes this overt through Victor, whose ambition, passion, and drive for knowledge ultimately mutate into an vicious obsession that takes an “absolute hold over my [his] imagination” (Shelley, 53). Initially fascinated with the grand miracles that the “old” ways of science promised, such as immortality and transmuting lead into gold, Victor is disheartened by the relatively simple goals that “new” science promises. As an incredibly ingenious young man, he therefore dismisses these simple goals, and instead sets his sights upon the secret of life. Unrelenting in his endeavor, Victor never stops to consider whether or not he *should* be attempting to create life of his own. Constantly referred to as his “Creator” by the monster, Shelley makes the point that Victor has been “playing God” with his experiments. He arrogantly and foolishly crosses boundaries that should not be tampered with by man, and passes the point of no return when he brings his creation to life. Blinded by the promise of power that knowledge makes, Victor is unable to see the potential danger of his experiments.

Education too plays a central role in the metamorphoses that the main characters undergo throughout the novel. As a privileged youth, Victor is able to study and learn as he pleases. While his cousin, Elizabeth, and his best friend, Henry, delve into the more romantic world of literature and poetry, Victor stumbles upon the works of Cornelius Agrippa, instilling within him a passion for “Natural Philosophy.” While the works that incite his interest belong to an outdated school of science, they effectively begin the scientific pursuit that will dominate the rest of his life. Shelley displays education in a benign light while the characters are children, who are seen as more pure or innocent to the romantic. However, as the characters grow up, this knowledge eventually becomes a burden, driving Victor toward his tragic mistake of creating the Monster. The Monster itself serves as an excellent example for the unintentional misfortunes that can come with over-education. Brought very suddenly into this world, the Monster, like a child, is unaware of what exactly he has been thrust into. His brutish and barbaric actions could, therefore, initially be attributed to fear or confusion. However, as the story goes on and the Monster becomes just as learned as the other characters (if not more so), Victor becomes all the more horrified and disgusted, realizing that the Monster must be fully aware of exactly what it is doing. While Victor’s education possesses him and rips him away from the realm of his loving friends and family, it transforms the Monster from an animalistic fiend into a cold, calculating murderer.

Despite Victor being rejuvenated by romantic means throughout the book, he clings tirelessly to his scientific pursuits. The comforting presence of his family and friends gives him some respite from his troubles, as do the glorious scenes of nature, yet it is impossible for him to break free from the shackles that science and rational thinking have bound him with. While the world around Victor encourages him in this pursuit - the blessing of education is revealed to be a two-edged sword, that ultimately betrays him to the unquenchable thirst for knowledge. The tragedy of Frankenstein reveals Shelley’s general distrust of the Enlightenment movement, urging man instead to strengthen his bonds with the romantic realms of emotion and nature, lest all they suffer the same fates as Prometheus or Dr. Frankenstein.

Citations

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein (The Modern Prometheus)*, (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2004).

Lynn Hunt, Thomas R. Martin, Barbara H. Rosenwein, and Bonnie G. Smith, *The Making of the West: People and Cultures*, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010).