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Honors 203 (H03)

Frankenstein Book Analysis

The writing of *Frankenstein* was heavily influenced by the ideas put forth by both Enlightenment *philosophes* and Romantic contemporaries. Mary Shelley was born to Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, who authored *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* respectively, and these works heavily influenced her thinking (Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, 199, Author's Introduction n. 1). Mary Shelley was married to Percy Bysshe Shelley, a famous Romantic poet, and was a contemporary of Lord Byron and other Romantics. Other books with ideas that had influence on Shelley were Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Rousseau's *Emile*. *Frankenstein* echoes many of the ideas and concerns of early 19th century society, with some of the most important being the developing argument of nature vs. nurture and the responsibilities of the parent on the development of the child.

Frankenstein starts out as a correspondence between Captain Robert Walton and his sister Margaret. He tells her about his venture to explore the North Pole and how he encounters Victor Frankenstein, who recounts his tale to Walton. Victor starts with his childhood, telling about how he tried to understand the world around him, and especially about his interest in the occult. He tells of his family, including the adoption of Elizabeth and how his mother died taking care of her a week before he leaves for Ingolstadt in Germany for university. While at university, he replaces his knowledge of the occult with chemistry and other natural

philosophies, and eventually discovers the secret to creating life. Victor eventually uses this knowledge to make the monster. After he is finished, he abhors his creation and falls ill after fleeing for several hours, but is nursed to health by his childhood friend Henry Clerval. Victor eventually returns home after finding out that his brother William has been murdered. Justine is accused and hanged for the murder when the locket William was wearing was found on her presence. Victor suspects the monster of the deed, and while climbing in the Alps he has an encounter with the monster, who tells his creator of his life until that point, including his early growth and awareness of his surroundings and his encounters with humanity, culminating with being rejected by his “protectors” and the murder of William. The monster demands that Victor make him a companion, and Victor is swayed by the monster’s arguments and threats. Victor travels, with Clerval, to England to do his work, but eventually separates in Scotland and heads to the Orkney Islands. While in the process of creating another monster, Victor fears that the only thing worse than what he has done would be to create another monster and eventually goes back on his promise and destroys his work, which the monster witnesses and cries in anger that Victor would see him “on his wedding night.” Victor eventually leaves the island and ends up in Ireland, where he is accused of the recent murder of Clerval, but is eventually acquitted and returns home with his father who had come to Ireland to free him. When they return home, Victor soon marries Elizabeth, but she is murdered on their wedding night by the monster. Victor’s father dies from grief soon after, and Victor pursues the monster to where Walton was stuck in the ice. As the path home (for Walton and his crew) clears, Victor dies and the monster appears. The monster justifies himself to Walton, but also expresses remorse at how his life has turned out, and departs towards the North Pole to die alone.

Many of the themes and ideas present in *Frankenstein* are ideas expressed by the Romantics, which was a reaction against the Enlightenment. The Romantics felt that humanity should not try and harness nature, but merely respect it and reflect upon its beauty. Frankenstein's attempt at creating life that ends with disaster reflects the belief that tampering too much with nature was dangerous. The Romantics also felt that human nature was not rational and we base our actions off of our emotions. The main characters all act out of emotion and not reason. Victor is initially spurred on by his lifelong passion for understand the world around him, and his later acts are centered on emotions such as fear for his and his family's life and revenge. The monster initially starts out as a creature of reason, but interaction with humanity brings out his base emotions of loneliness and hatred for his creator. The rest of humanity is also shown to be irrational, everyone who sees Frankenstein screams in terror and rejects him based on his looks but the blind old man conversed with him until being interrupted by the other inhabitants of the house. This is highly irrational and based on emotional instinct (mostly fear) instead of rational thinking. Another instance of irrational thinking was when the Irish people arrested Victor and convicted him without any evidence but his reaction to his best friend's dead body.

One of the most important reflections of 19th century concern was that of the argument of nature vs. nurture. Shelley was heavily influenced by two major thinkers in this aspect, Mary Wollstonecraft and Rousseau (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 202, Chapter 1 n.2), as she read both of their works before writing this book. Both Wollstonecraft and Rousseau felt that successful childhood came from being nurtured by loving parents. The way that the monster is portrayed supports this idea of nurturing being vital to successful children. The monster starts out

innocent and ignorant of the world in general, and he has to learn the hard way about everything from fire being hot to the inhumanity of man. As he has more and more experience with humanity, he turns from being a gentle giant to a monster focused on revenge against his creator. Instead of being nurtured by loving parents and becoming a civilized being, he is nurtured by the uncaring world and becomes the monster Victor believes him to be.

As well as supporting nurturing to be successful to the development of the child, *Frankenstein* also reflects on the responsibilities of the parent of this success. Victor's parents are an example of the ideal parents. Together they nurture and take care of all of their children, and at the same time encourage them to learn and grow in whatever way they choose. The mother rescues Elizabeth from destitute poverty, and takes care of the children to the point of death, dying from scarlet fever contracted from taking care of Elizabeth. The father supports and encourages Victor in his enterprises, sending him off to university to satisfy his desire for learning, as well as consoling Victor in his times of need and bringing him back home from Ireland. Victor on the other hand was a model of the neglectful parent. He abandons his creation in horror and disgust, suffering from a sort of post-partum depression (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, xxiv). The monster's appeals for Victor to make it a companion are met with disgust, then Victor relents, and then at the last moment Victor gets disgusted again and dashes the monster's last hopes by stopping his work forever. Most importantly, Victor never gives the creature his name, therefore never claiming it as his own. This enforces Victor's complete rejection of his creation. The creature's desire for love and affection from, and later revenge against, his creator is the driving force of all his actions. The story of the monster echoes the story of Mary. They were both born into a family with only one parent; they both craved the

attention and love of the other parent; and they were both responsible for the death of their creators (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, xxvi).

The argument about nature vs. nurture on the development of a child, as well as the responsibility of the parents for the successful development of the child, were important, but not the only, concerns of 19th century society that were reflected on in *Frankenstein*.

Frankenstein was heavily influenced by both parents of the author, and while Rousseau wrote about nurturing children he abandoned all of his children to society so they had to fend for themselves just like the monster. This is a topic that is still the subject of heated debate in the modern day, The novel itself was a child of the Romantic movement, being written by someone born to parents influential in the Enlightenment and taking their ideas and blending them with the new ideas and concerns of the Romantics. The concerns are both part of the Romantic movement and timeless enough for the book to still be read and discussed to the present.