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Scientific Negligence in *Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* contains a multitude of ethical dilemmas surrounding life, death, scientific experimentation, and sentience, and these questions have persisted throughout history and are still heavily relevant in today's society. The novel describes the character Victor Frankenstein and his attempts at unlocking the secrets of life and death. As an accomplished scientist, he eventually succeeds in his goal of creating a sentient being from a variety of body parts, introducing questions surrounding the ethics of creating artificial life. He immediately finds himself disgusted by the creature's appearance and flees. Because of this, the creature is left to its own devices, forced to navigate the world without any sort of guidance or care—this introduces the ethical dilemma of a creator's moral responsibilities to their living creations. The creature, now left to fend for itself in the hostile outside world, experiences incredible loneliness because it is rejected by society due to its appearance. As a result of this rejection, it commits several acts of violence throughout the novel. It begins with murdering Victor's younger brother William in a fit of rage, which profoundly impacts Victor and his family. Afterwards, the creature tracks down Victor and demands him to create a mate for it, which seems understandable given its societal rejection. Victor begins to create the creature's mate, but he breaks his promise to the creature and destroys its mate before it is finished. Therefore, the monster kills Victor's friend, Henry Clerval, leaving his body for Victor to find. The novel ends with the death of both Victor and his creature, and when the creature discovers the death of Frankenstein, it mourns the loss of

its creator. It wants to end its life because it no longer has a reason to live—although its relationship with Victor was often antagonistic, it feels a lack of purpose as it now has no creator, no guidance, no parental figure, and no partner. The creature feels that Victor failed to fulfill his duties as a creator, and the disruption of the creator-creation dynamic between the two is what creates the ethical dilemmas of the novel. Overall, in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein's neglect of his moral responsibilities towards his creation highlights the ethical complexities surrounding creator responsibility, the blurring of moral boundaries in the face of scientific ambition, and the tragic consequences of social rejection. Through an analysis of Victor's actions, his moral obligations, and the consequences he experiences, the enduring relevance of the novel's moral dilemmas and their resonance with contemporary debates in bioethics, artificial intelligence, and genetic engineering becomes clear.

Near the novel's beginning, Victor Frankenstein describes his successful attempt to unlock the secret of creating life. He even directly acknowledges the distinction between life and death, arguing that he has the moral responsibility of bringing life into the world: "Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me" (Shelley 35). In this passage, Victor clearly acknowledges his role as a creator of life, and he expects his creations to be subservient to him simply because he created them. While he mentions his creations' responsibility to look up to him as their creator, he fails to recognize and assume any of his responsibilities as a creator. Perhaps blinded by his ambition for scientific discovery, Victor does not carefully consider the ethical implications of bringing life into the world. Although it may seem obvious that he has the obligation to provide his creation with care and guidance, he neglects these responsibilities

almost immediately due to his disgust for the creature, abandoning it. Later, the creature pleads Victor in an attempt to earn his care: "I am thy creature, and I will be even mild to my natural lord and king, if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owest me. Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other, and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due" (72). The creature, who has still been created fairly recently at this point in the novel, is cognizant of the responsibilities Victor assumes as his creator. In response, Victor immediately tells it: "Begone! I will not hear you. There can be no community between you and me; we are enemies. Begone, or let us try our strength in a fight, in which one must fall" (72). Victor's scathing remarks towards his creation in response to its mere request of his guidance and care make his neglect glaringly apparent.

Because of Victor's refusal to take responsibility for his creation, a variety of tragic consequences unfold throughout the novel. Arguably, the monster's horrific actions can be seen as results of Victor's neglect. After Victor abandons his creation to fend for itself, the monster finds itself ostracized in a society where its appearance is met with revulsion and disgust. This sets Victor's monster on a quest for vengeance, committing several acts of violence out of rage and desperation. Later, when the monster confronts Victor, it describes how its rejection and isolation have turned it from an innocent creature to a violent monster: "I am malicious because I am miserable; am I not shunned and hated by all mankind? You, my creator, would tear me to pieces, and triumph; remember that, and tell me why I should pity man more than he pities me?" (106). It is directly stating that Victor's failure to uphold his end of the moral contract between creator and creation is the direct source of the plot's tragic events. In addition to the monster's suffering, Victor himself suffers due to his failure to care for the creature. The novel contains several examples of the suffering Victor has created for himself through his neglect.

Acknowledging the role his neglect has played in the novel's tragic events, Victor states: "I had been the author of unalterable evils; and I had lived in daily fear, lest the monster whom I had created should perpetrate some new wickedness" (66). He says this in response to the wrongful execution of Justine, who is falsely accused of a murder that was truly committed by his own creation. While he may deny that he has any obligations to his creation, he can't help but feel somewhat guilty because of his neglect. However, near the end of the novel, Victor takes a different position, acknowledging that while "[he] created a rational creature, and was bound towards him, to assure, as far as was in [his] power, his happiness and well-being," this does not make him responsible for the monster's actions—he does not find his past conduct "blamable" due to his other obligations towards his "fellow-creatures" (163). Victor's attitude towards his actions shifts from guilt to rationalization, arguing that while he did have a responsibility as the creature's creator, he also has obligations to humanity as a whole. Victor's character development highlights the novel's moral dilemmas, as his scientific experimentation comes with an inherent moral ambiguity that is left for the reader to interpret.

These dilemmas relate strongly to a variety of contemporary ethical debates on creator responsibility and scientific experimentation. A particularly notable controversy in the 21st century is that of abortion—these debates are often centered upon the responsibility involved in creating and taking life as well as individual beliefs about when life begins. The novel blurs the lines between life and death when Victor creates his monster from scavenged body parts from other living creatures. Additionally, the subsequent horror he feels after the monster's creation can be seen as symbolic of the responsibilities a mother has to her child. Some would consider abortion to be a cruel act of violence against innocent life, while others may argue that the mother has the right to abort her child because she is the one that created it. Furthermore, genetic

modification is another controversial issue in today's society. The ethical debates surrounding genetic modification parallel the moral ambiguities of Victor's actions. Genetic modification, much like Victor's experimentation, can come with terrible consequences. For example, scientists performing genetic modifications on human embryos in an attempt to remove a blindness-causing gene found that this process would frequently lead to the loss of an entire chromosome, resulting in disastrous consequences if these embryos were carried to term (Zuccaro et al.). Are these scientists responsible for the negative outcomes of their experimentation, or can it be justified much as Victor justifies his monster's creation in the name of furthering the field of science? Cloning is another highly controversial scientific issue, which raises questions about creator responsibility, the rights of sentient beings, and the implications involved in creating life. The novel deals with Victor's responsibilities towards his creation, mirroring the morally ambiguous obligations scientists may or may not have towards the well-being of their clones. This issue becomes even more complicated when considering cloning human life—do artificially-created humans have rights as sentient beings, much as Frankenstein's monster arguably does? Overall, Victor's neglect of his responsibilities as a creator makes him, arguably, directly responsible for the tragic events of the novel, and the moral dilemmas surrounding these responsibilities, and the ethics in ignoring them, are still relevant to many scientific discourses in today's world.

Next, the existence of Frankenstein's monster directly challenges modern perspectives of life and humanity in a variety of ways. The creature is an artificial creation of Victor Frankenstein, yet it displays sentience in its remarkable ability to learn, reason, communicate, and express emotions. However, this question is complicated by the fact that it is created from a variety of once-living body parts, essentially blurring the boundaries of life and death. Victor

directly remarks about his desire to cross this boundary, stating: “Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world” (Shelley 35). Led by his scientific ambition, Victor achieves his desire to transcend traditional notions of life without being prepared for the consequences that follow. The novel’s ethical dilemmas are deeply rooted in the ambiguity between the monster’s biological and artificial origins, directly challenging conventional ideas of humanity. The monster looks and behaves in a surprisingly human-like way, yet it was never gestated as humans are. It is clearly sentient, displaying the ability to experience emotions, suffering, and longing for human connection. Despite this, Victor clearly abhors it, referring to his own creation with incredibly dehumanizing language when describing the moments directly after its animation: “Oh! No mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived” (39). Victor’s choice of words, such as “hideous” and “wretch,” make it exceedingly clear that he does not conceive it as a sentient being worthy of any respect. Later, when confronted by his creation, he makes a statement, mentioned earlier, that exemplifies his lack of compassion for it: “I will not hear you. There can be no community between you and me; we are enemies,” later stating that “[the monster] has left [him] no power to consider whether [he is] just to [it]” and referring to it as “detested” (72-73). Despite the monster’s apparent sentience, Victor does not recognize any shared humanity between them, nor does he feel any responsibilities to it as its creator. The sentience of Victor’s monster becomes exceedingly clear through its response to its rejection by the family he tries to communicate with: “Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live? Why, in that instance, did I not extinguish the spark of existence which

you had so wantonly bestowed?” (99). The monster, obviously sentient and longing for acceptance, feels insurmountably alienated from humanity. Through these issues, the novel comments on the issue of the rights of sentient beings. Although the creature was not created through natural biological processes, it displays every characteristic that separates humans from mere animals, and its existence calls for a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be human.

Finally, the profound ethical questions raised by Victor’s lack of responsibility towards his creation and the blurring between the boundaries of life and death are still strikingly meaningful in today’s society. A wide variety of parallels can be drawn between the novel’s events and contemporary debates in the fields of bioethics and artificial intelligence. In the realm of bioethics, the responsibilities that Victor arguably has towards his monster resonate with the implications of genetic modification. For example, some ethicists may argue that genetically enhancing humans is a moral way of relieving suffering, while others, including ethics professor Nicholas Agar, argue that this directly threatens the human identity and devalues the species’ accomplishments (Sandler and Basl 98). Similarly, the question of Victor’s responsibilities strongly relates to the heavily debated topic of abortion. In the novel, Victor creates his monster without considering its future well-being—he is only concerned with furthering his scientific ambition. Abortion is an especially contested issue partly because of the ambiguity of what it means to be human—much as Victor does not see his sentient creation as a human, ethicists argue about where a human life ends and begins (Greasley). Interestingly, at the novel’s conclusion, Victor’s creature even calls himself “an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on” (167). While the word in this context refers more to a “misshapen product of a generation” according to an annotation, the concept of destroying a living being due to its

perceived flaws is still relevant with respect to the issue today. These complicated questions surrounding the creature's sentience and humanity are also increasingly relevant in the field of artificial intelligence. In modern times, artificial intelligence has rapidly developed the ability to "think, learn, predict, analyze, weigh, decide, know, and plan" (Goecke and Rosenthal-von der Pütten 5). Despite this, philosophers are still conflicted, as moral confusion comes from the fact that artificially intelligent systems have the capability to display agency and emotion without being truly conscious. Similarly, Victor's monster displays sentience yet is entirely ostracized by society—neither its creator nor the family it introduces itself to display any semblance of sympathy, compassion, or understanding for it, despite its clearly articulated thoughts and anthropomorphic appearance. While the creature is not a form of artificial intelligence in the way the term is used today, its total rejection by society despite its sentience mirrors ethical issues in the field of artificial intelligence. The novel's moral dilemmas, specifically those concerning Victor's responsibilities to his sentient creation, provide insight when examining contemporary ethics in a variety of scientific fields.

Overall, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* explores a variety of moral issues that are enduringly relevant today. These ethical dilemmas, including the creation of life, scientific experimentation, and the rights of sentient beings, all stem from Victor's decision to create a sentient being without assuming the responsibility that comes with it. Initially, Victor is driven by scientific ambition to create a new form of life, expecting it to be thankful and obedient to him. Directly after he achieves his goal, he is immediately repulsed by the creature and abandons it. The anguished creature's complete isolation sets off a chain of tragic events throughout the novel. As a result of Victor's evasion of his moral responsibilities, the deaths of William, Justine, and Henry Clerval occur from creature's desire for its creator's guidance. While Victor initially

feels guilty for his creature's actions, he later rationalizes his decision to abandon the creature out of his obligations to others. Victor's neglect mirrors the ethical implications of a variety of scientific developments. Firstly, debates surrounding genetic engineering often center on the responsibilities of the scientists. Some argue that scientists should take responsibility for the consequences of "disrupting the natural order," while others may say that negative outcomes are just the cost of furthering the field of scientific inquiry. Similarly, modern debates on abortion often center on the moral obligations the mothers may or may not have towards their unborn children. Opponents of abortion argue that it is immoral to destroy life based on perceived flaws, which is strikingly similar to how the creature commits suicide as a result of its societal rejection. The debate on abortion also deals with the blurring between the boundaries between life and death—it is surprisingly unclear where human life stops and begins. This also has parallels to the field of artificial intelligence. As artificially intelligent systems become more and more capable, questions arise about their sentience and rights, mirroring the novel's ethical dilemmas. While the creature appears sentient and anthropomorphic, it is driven to suicide because no one will accept it as a member of society. The creature's rejection raises questions about how humans should treat intelligent beings regardless of their origins. In conclusion, the plot of *Frankenstein* encourages the reader to consider a variety of moral questions surrounding creator responsibility, sentience, and what it means to be human. The novel's timeless themes parallel several debates in scientific ethics—genetic engineering, abortion, and artificial intelligence—which all require careful moral contemplation due to their broad implications for humanity. Ultimately, these issues are inherently subjective, unresolvable, and influenced by a variety of cultural factors, and this is exactly why *Frankenstein* is still incredibly relevant in today's political climate.

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