

INTRODUCTION

A spectre is haunting Frankenstein -- the spectre of Communism? Indeed, Frankenstein fears the day when his ability to create creatures ceases to be his and becomes socially owned. However, is Frankenstein really the powerful creator/master/bourgeois that one might imagine him to be? In this paper, I will attempt a Marxist interpretation of the struggle between Frankenstein and his creature in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.

INTERPRETATION

“Modern bourgeois society... has conjured up such gigantic means of production... is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.” (Marx 38)

In the quote above, Marx is describing how the modern conditions of production are constantly being upended by the revolt of modern productive forces. Eventually, society finds itself in a crisis, Marx (39) argues, and the bourgeoisie have only two ways of resolving it: destroying the mass of productive forces, or by conquering new markets.

We find a similar analogy in the creation of the creature by Frankenstein. Frankenstein was initially unsatisfied by modern science because it promised very little. While Frankenstein had grand ambitions, he was “required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth” (Shelley 48). However, he meets another professor (M. Waldman) who was more sympathetic to his cause and allowed him to see the link between the powers of modern science (thesis) and his grand ambitions (antithesis). Through expending his labour power, he was finally able to ‘satisfy’ his grand ambition - creating life (synthesis). However, after ‘conjuring up’ the means of creating new life (as well as creating the creature), Frankenstein eventually loses control over his life. The creature he creates

murders both William and Justine, and eventually demands that Frankenstein create a new creature.

Thus, Frankenstein is left with two choices: kill the creature (destroying productive forces), or create a new creature (conquering new markets).

Should Frankenstein be interpreted as the bourgeoisie since he owns the means of production (life creation)? It is difficult to liken all aspects of Frankenstein to the bourgeoisie because unlike the bourgeoisie, Frankenstein does not exploit his creature for his labour power. Instead, Frankenstein makes no use of the creature he has created and merely runs off in fear (Shelley 58). However, the fact remains that Frankenstein owns the means of production, and this serves as a driving factor behind his struggle with the creature, who we can represent as the proletariat. If Frankenstein was not the private owner of this means of production (life creation), he might not have necessarily experienced the struggle with his creature.

Though we may represent the creature as the proletariat, he does not start off as the proletariat. Initially, the creature is a blank slate with no knowledge of the world, and is better represented by the lumpenproletariat. He is initially without class consciousness and is unaware of his existence as an oppressed class until he comes into contact with humans. He spends time learning and preparing himself to meet the people in the cottage without scaring them but is eventually harshly rejected due to his hideousness. This rejection allows him to develop a class consciousness and discover “more clearly what a wretched outcast” he was (Shelley 133), thus evolving into the proletariat.

Once he develops this class consciousness, he understands that the only way to rid himself of his suffering is to seize the means of production owned by Frankenstein. He does this first by reasoning with Frankenstein to have a female creature created for him. Frankenstein initially accepts (Shelley 150), however, changes his mind later because he is worried that the creature (forces of production) will gain a new ally who may be more malignant and/or populate the world with more creatures

(Shelley 170). Thus, Frankenstein (like the bourgeoisie) is unable to “control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up”.

CRITICISMS

One might argue that by choosing to destroy the creature, Frankenstein is not best represented by the bourgeoisie but by the lower middle class such as the shopkeeper, artisan, etc. The lower middle class are separate from the proletariat in that they are reactionary (Marx 45). That is, they wish only to preserve the current state of affairs and “save from extinction their existence as fractions of the middle class”. By choosing to destroy the creature, Frankenstein is attempting to “roll back the wheel of history” (Marx 45).

There is more evidence to this claim. Throughout the book, Frankenstein attempts to show Walton why it is preferable to preserve the current state of affairs; to show “how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier... than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow” (Shelley 54). This is evidence that Frankenstein represents the reactionary middle class because instead of directing his efforts against the bourgeois conditions of production (being forced to create creatures to survive), he directs them against the instruments of production (knowledge).

THEME AND CONCLUSION

The fundamental theme of the novel, I argue, is about the dangers of technology and artificial intelligence. This Marxist interpretation of Frankenstein, on the other hand, allows us to empathize more with the creature because it allows us to see the creature as a living being that is oppressed rather than just a commodity or technology. Additionally, by employing Marx and Engel’s historical materialism, it is possible to predict the eventual murder (revolution) of Frankenstein by the creature due to the class struggle that exists (but this is out of my scope). Moreover, we can speculate that if Frankenstein provided more care for the creature, it is possible for them to live in a pseudo-communist utopia of mutual cooperation.

The novel in its entirety may not necessarily be analyzed in Marxist terms. There are some subtleties that prevent a simple equation of the creature to the proletariat, and Frankenstein to the bourgeoisie. However, we can still apply a Marxist interpretation to certain key scenes in the book without focusing on the overall compatibility of Frankenstein as a novel with Marxist theory. (1015 words)

REFERENCES

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The communist manifesto*. Penguin, 2002.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text*. Penguin, 2018.