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ENG 3U

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: A Lesson for the Modern Reader

The 1818 novel *Frankenstein* by British romantic poet Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley is a timeless classic with elements of science-fiction, horror, revenge and tragedy. The fight between life and death is the focus of the story's two main characters, protagonist Victor Frankenstein and the antagonist the monster. When Victor is found in the Arctic Circle by ship captain Robert Walton, Victor recounts his life story leading up to the creation of the monster and the monster's escape from Victor. Underneath the obvious lines of text written by the author Mary Shelley, the novel explores a deeper set of reoccurring themes that despite being written and published over 200 years ago still holds true to the modern world. Many lessons are to be learned from Victor Frankenstein and his the monster including the consequences of blind ambition, the distortion of morals throughout the novel, and Mary Shelley's commentary on society as a whole and how humans treat each other. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a timeless classic whose main ideas are lessons and teachings that are still relevant now in today's modern society more than ever. The main themes and ideas explored all appear in the novel *Frankenstein* but are not always so clear-cut and explicit, which is one of the reasons why this novel is a cut above the rest and what makes this novel so timeless.

The most obvious theme is the consequences of blind ambition, a problem that plagues both Victor and the monster throughout the novel. Victor's habit of blind ambition does not become apparent until he goes to Ingolstadt to study the modern sciences where he becomes reclusive and obsessive in his endeavours to create life. Mary Shelley uses this reoccurring theme in the story with not only Victor, but with the monster as well. The monster is a very calculated character, almost to a greater degree than Victor. The monster was very meticulous in his plots to murder William and frame the killing on Justine. Because of this, it is hard to believe that the monster shared Victor's trait of blind ambition until the

events at the very end of the book. When Victor passes away on the boat, the monster realizes his hatred was a mistake and a waste of a lifetime of possibilities. "I, who irretrievably destroyed thee by destroying all thou lovedest. Alas! He is cold, he cannot answer me" (226). The monster was shocked at his death and according to Walton's account of the scene, was in total disbelief of his creator's dead body. Those emotions soon turned into grief and regret. The emotions experienced by Victor and the monster are human emotions that everybody has experienced and a huge element of the plot. Blind ambition affects the modern western citizen now more than ever in our fast paced society. People today live their lives focused on distractions like phones and social media and treat those outlets as their goals without stepping back and asking if it's the right thing to be focusing so much time on. Careers and schooling in the modern society are much more competitive than they were 200 years ago. Mary Shelley's message about blind ambition in this novel only stands broader as time goes on. If Victor had stepped back and asked himself if all of his work was worth the bad outcomes, he probably wouldn't have wasted his prime years focused on creating the monster and perhaps would've went on to create a family of his own with Elizabeth, instead of digging around grave yards. The irony of the theme of blind ambition is almost strangely poetic. The monster is born from Victor's blind ambition, and his death is the result of the monster's very own blind ambition. This leads to the next point as to why this book's lessons are relative today.

On Victor's pursuit of knowledge, he twisted his own morals and ethics to supplement his thirst for answers. Even after the monster was born and he began his murderous rampage, Victor refused to take responsibility to save him from falling from his moral high road he had in his head. His ego was his vindication for all of his actions leading up to his death. Mary Shelley composed Victor very carefully to show this part of him early in the book when the rising action began. Victor was aware of his ego as early as chapter two when recounting his childhood to Walton. "Wealth was an inferior object but what glory would attend the discovery if I could banish disease from the human frame" (29). Victor wanted to be remembered and he would do questionable acts to gain this fame. Today, this greed for fame and fortune

is still a very common trait amongst our society's icons and many people who we look up to like reality television stars are only known for these exact traits albeit for material items and not for the acquirement of knowledge. The goals have changed with time, but not mankind's greed. Mary Shelley was no stranger to a twist of morals herself. Her husband Percy Shelley was a married man when Mary had met him and fled England to travel Europe together. They had only gotten married after Percy's first wife committed suicide. Even in the 1800's adultery was seen as a totally immoral act. Mary Shelley could've been using her own life experiences which were full of death, lies and adultery to comment on the world around her.

In the world of science many still debate over ethics. Today's topic is to some degree, the same issue of creating life or rather, "playing God" in regards to somatic-cell research and cloning. Dolly the sheep, the first mammal to be successfully cloned, sparked a massive controversy when ethical concerns were presented including the health of Dolly. Like the monster's hideousness, Dolly "was plagued with health problems and was also suffering from premature arthritis" (Collins web). Of course, there was no such thing as the cloning of animals when this novel was published, but the question still remains the same: with all of the trouble to go through, is it worth it to birth a creature whose existence may be doomed to an agonizing or gruesome lifetime? The question of humans playing God, with all that could go wrong with human error, is present in *Frankenstein* and is still an interesting take on the ethics of creating life with today's research.

Frankenstein's social commentary does not just end at the morals of creating life. The characters in novel were all very quick to judge situations and others, including the monster. This quick judgement is the reason for most faults in the story. The first time Victor lays eyes upon his creation, he is in absolute disgust: "How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form?" (48). Victor, the monster's creator, was the very first man to dismiss the monster. This chapter is an allusion to the bible's story of creation and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, an earlier novel published in 1667. "The creature is bitter and dejected after being turned away from human civilization, much the same way that Adam in "Paradise Lost" was turned out of

the Garden of Eden.” (Mellor 106). With the connections to the bible, these allusions reinforce Frankenstein’s relatability to modern society where Christianity is one of the most practiced religions to this day.

There is a certain juxtaposition in Victor and the monster and how they are viewed by the people around them. Victor is seen as a strong, forgiving man in the eyes of Elizabeth, especially when he refuted claims that Justine was the killer of Victor’s younger brother William when he in fact knew the monster killed William because he seen him outside of Geneva. Victor may not have been a coward, but his actions certainly do point towards that possibility. Victor cowered from his laboratory when the monster had awoke, and he had cowered when Justine was standing trial for a murder she didn’t commit. The only piece of real evidence that the court had against Justine in the trial was that she had a locket with a picture that William wore. Although Justine could not explain how she had it on her person (it was planted on her by the monster), that could not have been enough evidence to warrant the execution of her. The court did not look any deeper into the possible alibis for Justine, and coped out by punishing Justine to death.

On the other hand, the monster was always seen as the opposite of Victor’s outer appearance by mankind. A hideous, awful spawn of Satan himself. The monster was not born with an evil conscience. Like Victor’s beauty, the monster’s ugliness was only skin-deep and he was not born with wretchedness, he was taught by humans. There is a lot to be said about how society shaped the monster into a true devil. Characters like De Lacy and his children show that kindness is often only reserved for those who look alike in society as a whole and the out casting of individuals is often not justified. After trying to do a good deed and save a little girl from drowning, the monster is identified as the enemy to the other humans and is shot in the shoulder. This is perhaps the most pivotal point in the development of the monster as he thereafter curses all men. "inflamed by pain," he pledges "eternal hatred and vengeance to all mankind" (Shelley 143). The treatment of the monster is reminiscent of the bullying problem that has reached its height today in schools around North America and the incidents like the infamous Columbine shooting

where regretfully, two social outcasts were pushed to murder their peers. The monster in this scenario is the outcast child who is picked on constantly by his peers and the day the monster was fired upon by the stranger in the woods is the day that child's mental state breaks and either hurts himself, or someone else. What would have happened if even one man or woman of any age showed the monster even an ounce of love and compassion? Would he be able to integrate into his society and live a happy life? With the modern example of bullying, the answer is yes. The monster, although he was a brute of an individual, his heart was in fact made of gold and he showed this on numerous occasions like when he used "extreme labour" to rescue a young girl from drowning" (142). The true monster on the inside was behaviour learned from the nurture of humans, not a conduct he was born with naturally. This all ties into an easily fooled society that judges things on first glance (book by its cover) before diving any deeper into the matter, both for the monster and the trial of Justine.

In conclusion, the story of Frankenstein is still a completely relevant story with lessons to be learned for the modern reader. Shelley's subtle social commentary is effective and thought provoking to all readers. The major themes that are touched on in Frankenstein including carelessness and blind ambition, the distortion of morals and ethics in individuals like Victor and finally her commentary on society and how fairly individuals treat each other are all still relevant 200 years later. It is safe to say Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is a timeless classic whose lessons are more important than ever in our fast-paced society.

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