Frankenstein Essay, Research Paper

Science and Technology: The Romantic View in Frankenstein

The eighteenth century was a remarkable time for humanity. The movement known

as the Enlightenment brought drastic changes in the cultural, scientific, and industrial

aspects of life. Rationalism and critical thinking applied to anything from art and literature

to scientific studies and technological inventions. The advancement was clear and inevitable.

Nonetheless, not everyone seemed to share the views of the Enlightenment. The upper class

Europeans, children of the Enlightenment, revolted against the rationality of the eighteenth

century and focused rather on imagination and development of potential as the key

components of life. Their fierce opposition to technology and industry as well as

unparalleled love and fascination with nature, expressed often in a literary or artistic form,

earned them the name of romantics (McKay 766). Consequently, Mary Shelley s

Frankenstein, being a centerpiece of romantic literature, criticizes the extreme uses of

science and technological advances by means of an evil monster, which despite being a

scientific wonder, proves to be an uncontrollable force, making life miserable for humanity.

In her novel, Shelley shows the hazardous and destructive effects of science taken beyond its

simple purposes, depicting rather accurately the views of romanticism.

Science is shown to have negative effects very early in the novel, even before the

introduction of Frankenstein s monster. Both Captain Walton and Victor Frankenstein,

endure sacrifice and hardship in pursuance of their humanity-benefiting goals. While

Frankenstein s passion for creating a human being made him neglect his health,

surroundings, as well as friends and family (Shelley 40), Walton s expedition proved to be

lonesome and full of danger. In a letter to his sister, he wrote I desire the company of a man

who could sympathize with me, whose eyes would reply to mine (5) and this proves to be

the biggest distraction to otherwise very promising scientific endeavor. It is seen that both

men become infatuated with their works, which in turn causes severe disturbances to their

usual, or natural, way of life. While romanticism certainly does not oppose passion, in cases

where one chooses science over family, friends, and nature, it does show its disapproval

(McKay 767).

This opposition for using science and technology for personal satisfaction or

obtaining results not directly benefiting humanity is further shown by Shelley in the creation

of Frankenstein s monster. The monster personifies the extreme use of knowledge and

represents the negative aspects of science. This can be first concluded from the appearance of

the creature, which does not resemble accurately the human form. His yellow skin scarcely

covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black and

flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; his watery eyes seemed almost of the same colour as

the dun-white sockets in which they were set (Shelley 42). The wretch was of a hideous

form and no mortal could support the horror of that countenance (43). Even the creature

himself acknowledged his ugliness and could not endure his appearance (105).

The visual appearance of the monster was only one way of showing how wrong

things can go when humans involve themselves too deeply into scientific research. The other,

undoubtedly more important, was the monster s attitude and actions. Although very gentle

and unfiendish in the early stages of his life, the creature and his development was totally

dependent on his creator. However, abandoned and repulsive the wretch was not accepted by

humanity and only the desert mountains and dreary glaciers proved to be his home (84). I

was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend (84) says the monster, indicating that it

was not up to him to decide his fate. He is absolutely right in this argument, since it was the

responsibility of Frankenstein to familiarize his creature with life, just as a parent would

with a child, a responsibility for which the scientist was not ready. Not only did he create a

monster, he also was responsible for it becoming a murderer. This shows the Romantic

opposition to technology, which is viewed as something involving enormous responsibility

and dedication going far beyond the mere creation of something. Making sure of its proper

use and full development is probably even more important, something the romantics thought

eighteenth century was not ready for.

Frankenstein did not deny his fault in creating the monster, acknowledging his input

on the deaths of his beloved ones. I had turned loose into the world a depraved wretch

whose delight was in carnage and misery; had he not murdered my brother? (61),

contemplated the scientist and added each successive mischief of his creation to his blame.

The mere existence of the monster bothered Frankenstein immensely. His days passed in fear

and disease and the only spark to his low-burning candle of life was the idea of

revenge(195).

The monster s life, too, was equally miserable. He did not find pleasure in killing

William, Clerval, nor Elizabeth. Quite on the contrary, he felt devastated that he had to

destroy the ones whom he wanted to co-exist with. His heart was fashioned to be susceptible

of love and sympathy, and when wrenched by misery to vice and hatred, it did not endure the

violence of the change without torture (202). However, he felt these steps were needed to

preserve his own existence and to get what he wanted which is only natural to living things.

Thus, Frankenstein and his monster became embedded in a circle of mutual hate and revenge

- the first, for the lives of his friends and family, the second for his wretchedness. Neither

would give up, living only to see the other die (205), adding more drama to the clearly

devastating effects of Frankenstein s passion.

It was after all the scientist s passion, his will to learn and explore that led to the

creation of the monster. It was in the laboratory, and under the influence of Frankenstein s

predecessors, that the creature was born. After that, Nature enraged by the idea of a human

toying with its most relinquished secrets, took the matter into its own hands and made sure

both the creator and the hideous mass he formed would endure torture. It is hard to explain it

otherwise. The monster killed out of grief, not out of natural preference and there was

absolutely nothing that he could do to become part of human culture. Frankenstein s

helplessness in trying to rid the Earth of this wretch was equally evident. Although mortal,

the monster possessed superhuman strength and endurance and in a one on one combat,

which is what the scientist desired, he would be unbeatable. Neither the monster nor

Frankenstein can be fully accountable for the tragedies that occurred, since both showed

efforts in trying to be the best beings they could. It was the extreme use of knowledge and the

ambition of the scientist that is at fault. It is that same unbeneficial, destructive nature of

science and technology that romanticism opposed.

While poor Frankenstein was in total devastation after the loss of his brother and was

willing to do anything to protect his remaining family, he did something which the romantics

would probably approve of. When the monster urged him to create a companion for himself,

the scientist agreed to the undertaking, threatened by the prospect of the enraged creature

killing the rest of his family. Upon the near completion of his work, however, he realized that

this was not the solution. I thought with a sensation of madness on my promise of creating

another like to him, and trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was

engaged (151) recalls Frankenstein. At that instance he sacrificed the lives of Clerval,

Elizabeth, and his father s, as well as his own. At that moment he also prevented the devilish

race from ever expanding beyond its one member, the monster that he originally created. It is

amazing how romantic this decision was and yet that it was the second most contributing one

to the so-many deaths that occured. It is the second, because the moment of creation is

unsurpassed to the significance of events as well as to the romantic criticism.

The romantic movement originated in the second half of the eighteenth century and

was in fact concentrated to oppose the views of Enlightenment. Despite the disapproval of

science and technology, the romantics were not unreasonable (McKay 767). They

understood that science was important and when used with care and proper intentions,

yielded very gratifying results. Even in the case of Frankenstein s monster, the good

characteristics, as outnumbered by the bad as they were, did exist. The creature is of

unhuman strength, speed and endurance (Shelley 152). His ability to learn proves to be

quite extraordinary, assuming that his contact with people was extremely limited. However,

it is those same qualities that made the creature so lethal and proved the romantic view that

science is not for humans to abuse. The romantic view can be summarized in the words of

Frankenstein: Seek happiness in tranquility and avoid ambition, even if it be only the

apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries (200). It is

unfortunate that he realized it on his deathbed.