

# Chapter 4

## The Letters and Frankenstein's Story

### 4.1 Readings and Homework

- Readings: *Frankenstein*, Four Letters, Chap. I-IX
- Homework: Give a short answer to the following questions on the basis of your readings:
  1. Select relevant passages (quote page, beginning and ending) illustrating Shelley aesthetic ideas about the beautiful and the sublime. Make sure to explain these terms.
  2. Selecting and quoting relevant passages, explain what position Shelley takes concerning science.
  3. Selecting and quoting relevant passages, explain what position Shelley takes concerning education.
  4. Selecting and quoting relevant passages, explain what position Shelley takes concerning friendship.

### 4.2 Action

- Walton's letters to his sister:
  - he is gone far north on a scientific and geographic expedition

- Ship is trapped in the ice, surrounded by fog
- Sighting of the monster with dog sled traveling over the ice
- Bring Victor Frankenstein on board and bring him back to life
- Frankenstein's story
  - Frankenstein youth in Geneva and adoption of Elizabeth
  - Departure to university:
    1. Ingolstadt
    2. his mother dies as he is to depart (45-6)
    3. promises mother on her deathbed that he will marry Elizabeth (46)
    3. Clerval, at first, is not allowed by his father to go away to university (47)
  - Meets the professors
  - takes up an interest in the "principle of life" (58)
  - discovers the cause of life and how to bestow life upon matter (59)
  - works like mad and creates the monster
  - meets Clerval, falls ill, and Clerval nurses him back to health (72ff)
  - is now repelled by natural philosophy (81)
  - turns away from the study of science to study Oriental languages and literature along with Clerval (83)
  - receives word from his father of the murder of his little brother William
  - Victor goes immediately to Geneva (91)
  - meets the monster
  - Justine's trial, condemnation, and execution

### **4.3 The ways of narration**

#### **4.3.1 Literary Form of *Frankenstein***

##### **A version of the frame device**

- Frame device: telling a story within the framework of another story

- Example: *The Arabian Nights*, in which the frame story is that of Scheherazade, who tells the stories of Sinbad the Sailor, Ali Baba and the 40 thieves, etc.
- It is associated with Asian literature, but also has antecedents in English literature at least as far back as *Canterbury Tales* (Geoffrey Chaucer, 14th century)
- It is a device that allows the author and/or narrator to remove themselves from responsibility for the events that transpire

### The multiple layers of frame story

- Frame 1: letters by Walton to his sister
  - a. the outermost frame
  - b. describes to her his meeting with Victor Frankenstein, which introduces his story
- Frame 2 : Victor Frankenstein's story about his creating life
- Frame 3 : Frankenstein in turn repeats what the monster has told him about his life
- Frame 4: The monster in turn repeats a tale he overheard from the cottagers near whom he was living

The first three frames encourage us to compare the narrators

- Walton, like Frankenstein – and his monster – are seekers of knowledge
- all three are excessively introspective

The innermost story is about the de Lacey's and Safie, who are characterized as good

- we get the sense of peeling away layers of corruption to get down to the inner core of goodness – very much in a Rousseau's style
- reflecting the theme that people are by nature good
- but concerning this idea again, Mary Shelley's position *Frankenstein* might be more nuanced than a quick reading suggests.

### 4.3.2 Walton and Frankenstein, two mirroring characters

*Throughout the novel, Walton, Frankenstein and the even monster possess multiple mirroring characters.*

- Education
  - Walton, apparently a good man, is an autodidact (pp. 7, 11)
    - a. like Frankenstein and the monster
    - b. reads math, science (8)
    - c. worries about being taken for a romantic of little education (11)
    - d. lack of languages: no classical education
- Ambition
  - He is benevolent, but also Promethean (goes beyond his human nature): not mere wealth, but glory and benefit conferred "on all mankind to the next generation" (!)(6)
  - but also goes beyond the scientific quest: Compare his description of his quest in the second letter (14)
    - a. tells of something in his soul he does not understand, a belief in the marvelous
    - b. foreshadows Victor Frankenstein's account of his quest: something that goes beyond science and approaches a Faustian pursuit
    - c. his quest "hurries [him] out of the common pathways of men" (14)
 This also, of course, is common with Frankenstein.
- Walton has the occasion to recognize a possible himself in Frankenstein.
  - a. he recognizes benevolence, but also "an expression of wildness and even madness" (21, 23). This can be due to Frankenstein's life, but also to the mixed nature of the ambitious scientist, full of good intentions, but whose ambition leads to disaster. See p. 24: "Unhappy man! Do you share my madness?[...]"
  - b. claims him as the friend he is seeking (23)
  - c Walton and Frankenstein's mirroring quests.

- Consider the scene in which Walton explains his own quest to Frankenstein (24)
  - a. He said he would sacrifice anything, even human life
  - b. Frankenstein then embarks on a warning in the form of his own unhappy tale
  - c. Says he is breaking his silence just for Walton's sake (26-7, q.v.)
  - d. The chapters that follow are then supposedly Walton's transcript of the tale that Frankenstein relates

Both characters mirrors each other. If the destiny of Frankenstein is going to be decided in the novel, there is hope that Walton gives up in his own outrageous ambition. He is the one who is supposed to learn something from the story to come.

## 4.4 Sublime and beautiful: Shelley and Romanticism

### 4.4.1 Reminder: The Beautiful and the Sublime

**The sublime** - is huge, overwhelming, somewhat chaotic, provokes a mixed feeling of awe and power. An aesthetic experience of the sublime is an aesthetic experience where you grasp something beyond human finite understanding.

- is the Romantics deemed the highest aesthetic experience, especially by contrast with the beautiful for which they had nothing but contempt.

**The beautiful** - is small, in good proportions, pleasurable, provokes the nice and comfortable feeling of fitness, i.e. that everything is in order.

- is probably defended against the Romantics's attacks by Shelley in the novel.

- That said, she uses a lot of the resources of the sublime in the novel for better narrative effects.

### 4.4.2 Some relevant Passages

A close study of the following passages suggests that Shelley is criticizing the romantics' ideal of a sublime experience, and favors the more modest classical ideal of proportions, socialization and order.

#### Setting

The far north can be interpreted as a sublime landscape

- a. in the third letter, writes of dangers of sheets of ice (16)
- b. and in the fourth, of being trapped in the ice, surrounded by fog and "vast and irregular plains of ice" (18)
- c. in the second letter, writes of a "half pleasurable and half fearful" sensation in anticipation of his departure (14). This is the aesthetic experience of the sublime

#### Walton

- Promethean ambition – Letter I
- Romantic character and found of sublime experiences – Letter I and II
- Letter III : "What can stop the determined heart and resolved will of man?" could be the subtitle of the novel!

#### The monster

First apparition of the monster makes him a figure of the sublime

- a. described as a "gigantic" man (19) – again, the sublime is huge, where the beautiful is small
- b. monster's appearance excites "unqualified wonder" – the astonishment of the aesthetic experience of the sublime

Frankenstein arriving at the scene of the crime, sees the monster illuminated in a flash of lightning (94)

1. again the sublime aesthetic – perceives him at a safe distance, in the gloom
2. storm itself is "terrific" (93)

### **Elizabeth, and contrast with Frankenstein**

- Elizabeth is a symbol of the beautiful (33-4)
- Victor contrasted with Elizabeth:
  - He is characterized by ardor, a sometimes violent temper, and vehement passions. This however leads to “intense application”. He has the thirst for knowledge, the secret causes of things.
  - She is calmer and contemplative. She takes delight in the sight of nature beauty. She is also painted as a protecting angel for the two guys. She allows them to direct their ambition in the right way.
- Victor also contrasted with his friend Henry Clerval (37)
  - Henry reads chivalry and romance. He is a man of enterprize and adventure. His interest is in the virtue of great men. His ambition is to do good (38-9).
  - Victor’s interest is in science or ”natural philosophy,” in metaphysics (38-9); his ambition is to ”penetrate the secrets of nature” (41).
- Already a Promethean ambition:
  - desire to learn the secrets of heaven and earth(38)
  - also p 42
  - 1. like Walton, not concerned with mere wealth
  - 2. but the secret of life

### **Frankenstein**

- Sublime view on science and Sublime quest
  - As he works on the monster, he ignores the change of seasons, neglects friends and family (63, 64-5) DEHUMANIZATION
  - 1. note that in the two years that he pursues his studies under Waldman that he never visits home (57)
  - 2. he is ”insensible to the charms of nature” (63), i.e., to the beautiful
  - 3. his father criticizes Victor for neglecting his duties (63)

4. upon reflection, Victor realizes that it is not only the pursuit of knowledge, but any pursuit that goes too far that is wrong (64, q.v.)

Shelley seems to speak on her own name p.64: then it is not science, but Frankenstein's pride and outrageous ambition which lead to the catastrophe.

- Contrast with the importance of friendship in the novel: Isolation is dehumanization
  - Walton and the need for a friend
  - Frankenstein in Ingolstadt, working alone on his project.
  - We'll see that the monster too will be isolated and will suffer from it.
  - By contrast, Frankenstein describes Clerval as restoring him to life (73)
    - a. compare the way Henry restores Victor to life with the way Victor restores his monster to life:
    - b. Henry uses kindness, attentiveness, etc.
    - c. compare also to Walton, who brings Victor back to life with brandy, blankets, the kitchen stove (20-1)
- Sublime creation of life
  - A. brings the thing to life on a rainy night in November
  - B. it inspires horror in him – a sublime experience again (67)
  - C. has a nightmare of Elizabeth turning into his mother's corpse, awakes to discover his monster in his room, looking at him (67)
- When recovers in the spring – back to beautiful
  - 1. Victor enjoys the beauty of nature for the first time: "I remember the first time I became capable of observing outward objects with any kind of pleasure" etc. (73-4)
  - 2. in other words, he turns from the sublime to the beautiful
- Shelley contrasts Oriental literature with Greek, Roman heroic literature: (84)
  - 1. the Oriental leans toward the beautiful, rather than the sublime



#### 4.4. *SUBLIME AND BEAUTIFUL: SHELLEY AND ROMANTICISM* 57

2. it's also heroic ambition as much as science that he is turning away from

3. but is this a fair or accurate characterization of Oriental literature?

- Clerval also teaches Victor to love nature, children, etc. – the beautiful, rather than the sublime (85)

- Finally renewed ability to see the beautiful (beginning, on the boat)

Frankenstein has been made human again by his misfortune – peeled of the Promethean ambition of the highly educated scientist.

Genuine beauties of nature vs. Sublime (25-6)

#### **Frankenstein's irresponsibility**

- Upon creation, Frankenstein rushes out of room:

1. literally runs away from RESPONSIBILITY

2. cf. Aristotle's account of tragic flaw, how it includes a "frailty"

- Although he feels responsible for the death of his brother (95-6)

1. he will not confess his responsibility to others

2. rationalizes away the need to confess, telling himself he won't be believed (95-6, q.v.)

3. and again, where he says he would be regarded as mad and that Justine would be freed (pp. 99 and 101)

- He rushes out again of the courtroom when it becomes clear to him that the trial is going badly for Justine (106)

1. just as he rushes out of the room when he brings the monster to life

2. Frankenstein literally runs away from responsibility whenever facing a difficulty.

### 4.4.3 Conclusion

As Wendy Steiner explains in her introduction, the appreciation of the simple charms of nature, the beautiful, was thought to be a lesser sort of aesthetic experience (xviii) by the romantics. For Mary Shelley, however, these things are all sources of goodness.

Indeed:

- Frankenstein is embodying the sublime
- The Sublime is the symbol of the romantic aesthetics
- Frankenstein is then a “romantic hero” whose acts and ways of thinking are criticized throughout the novel.
- Instead of the usual solitary genius, a type of the romantic aesthetics, the romantic character is here someone going through a dehumanizing experience, is responsible for several death due to his ambition, and is regularly running away from responsibility.

This is far from the romantic rebel, independent and strong enough to endure the heights of sublime experiences.

Thus, it seems an honest interpretation to say that Shelley defends the classical beautiful against the romantic sublime.

It remains that she certainly uses the romantic literacy devices at her advantage all along the novel!

## 4.5 Shelley and Science

### 4.5.1 Frankenstein self education (39-40)

- Readings
  - Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535), Albertus Magnus (d. 1280) Paracelsus (1493-1541): alchemists, magicians, hermeticists
  - Self-education in these subjects: his father has no interest in them – “curse” which leads to tragedy (40, 41)
  - Ancient vs. modern science:
    - a. Dismissal of Newton on p. 41 ??? Shelley is ambiguous on this point. Victor’s interest in alchemy is part of his Promethean ambition.
    - b. Concept of final causes in the next paragraph. Neglect of final causes was a common complaint raised against Newtonian science

- c. Note that Darwinian revolution represents the application of this new conception of science to biology
  - d. Newton, and modern science as "untaught peasant"? Beware of who is saying what! Is it Shelley's voice?
  - e. See p.42: "render man invulnerable".
  - f. Also, p.43: great expectations go with great disappointments.
- Encounter with electricity temporarily turns him away from alchemical interests (43-4)
    1. occasion of lightning storm – a sublime experience, watching it hit oak tree from safe inside his doorway
    2. visitor explains electricity to him (43)
    2. turns to mathematical sciences instead (43, q.v.)

#### 4.5.2 The Professors

- The professors at university react to his youthful studies of alchemy (49)
1. Professor Krempe
    - a. professor of natural philosophy
    - b. read his account of Victor's study of Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus as having been a waste of time, "a thousand years old" (50)
    - c. Krempe is described as "uncouth" (49), "a little squat man with a gruff voice and a repulsive countenance" (50), "conceited" (51)
    - d. consider his name:
      - 1.) die Krempe is literally edge, border, brim; but colloquially it is used to refer to trash or rubbish
      - 2.) ein Krempeler is a rag-picker
    - e. his name reflects Victor's opinion of physics:
      - 1.) Victor describes how as a boy he had been contemptuous of the goals of modern science (50-1)
      - 2.) Recall the passage from p. 41 where he talked about Newton picking up shells
  2. Professor Waldman (51)
    - a. chemistry
    - b. name signifies a woodland spirit
    - c. appears "benevolent" (52), manners are "mild and attractive" (53)

- d. rekindles Victor's interest in science: speaks of greater rewards (52-53)
- e. somewhat less disparaging toward alchemy than Krempe: sees alchemists as having performed a useful service (54)

### 4.5.3 Shelley, Science and Romanticism

- Sometimes this novel is interpreted as anti-science: probably an oversimplification, if not a mistake
  1. not only do his professors contrast science with alchemy
  2. in the last chapter, Victor had turned to science when he became disillusioned with alchemy
  3. see also p.57: not all science is crazy science?
- Science is a sublime experience for Frankenstein
  - a. consider Frankenstein's description of himself as "animated by an almost supernatural enthusiasm" (58)
  - c. compare this to the romantics' claims about a special talent, gift, or divine inspiration
- The message seems to be:
 

*What is blamable in Frankenstein is not that he is a scientist, but that he views science as sublime. The sublime is the real target.*
- Thus, instead of reading Frankenstein as a romantic reaction against science, one could read it
  1. as Mary Shelley's warning about refusing to take responsibility for the consequences of one's actions, implicitly criticizing the romantics for their rejection of moral authority, tradition
  2. as well as a criticism of an aesthetic that valued the sublime over the beautiful, an aesthetic that dehumanizes us, as we have already seen
- Victor's tragic mistake is not just the pursuit of science or some other sort of knowledge, but the attempt to use this knowledge to create life, setting oneself up against God (53). This is the Prometheus-like mistake.
  - a. see comparison to creator, pp. 61-2

b. and allusion to Prometheus: animating "lifeless clay" (62)

NOTE : The Albatross !!! Samuel Taylor Coleridge *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

