

Chapter 5

The Monster's story

5.1 Readings and Homework

- Readings: Chap. X-XVII
- Homework: Give a short answer to the following questions on the basis of your reading:
 1. More about the beautiful and the sublime: what is the message that Shelley tries to convey?
 2. How does the monster's story illustrate Rousseau's ideas about human nature and civilization?
 3. Can you find any evidence of the influence on Mary Shelley from her mother early feminist ideas?
 4. What do you think of Shelley's attitude toward people from different cultures than her own? Explain.
- In what sense is Frankenstein facing a tragic situation when the Monster asks for a partner?

5.2 Action

- The monster's wandering and survival
- Discovering senses, learning by experience
- The cottage and the failure of socialization
- Rage against all humanity in general, and his creator in particular

5.3 More about the Beautiful and the Sublime: what is the message of the novel?

5.3.1 Chapter X (122)

Frankenstein continues his **journey through the mountains** (122)

- The **scenery** is described as sublime (122). The description is thick with the language of the sublime:
 - a. "ragged, bare ravine"
 - b. "awful and majestic in nature"
 - c. "a scene terrifically desolate"
 - d. the "dangerous" path – slightest noise will cause stones to roll down from above (124)
 - e. descends onto a huge, uneven glacier (125)
- **The effect of this sublime scenery is to turn Victor away from human cares** (123)
 - a. he experiences a sublime ecstasy, is consoled (123) and finally feels "something like joy": does he forget the innocents death??
 - b he does not want a guide – he does not want another human there – the romantic hero is a solitary man. See the "solitary grandeur"
 - c. this explains his lament:

Alas! Why does man boast of sensibilities superior to those apparent in the brute . . . If our impulses were confined to hunger, thirst, and desire, we might be nearly free . . . (124, q.v.) [81]

In other words, Victor would turn away from all that makes him human.

Thus, the message would be: experiencing the sublime is a form of dehumanization.

5.3. MORE ABOUT THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE SUBLIME: WHAT IS THE MESSAGE OF THE N

5.3.2 The monster

- **The monster is a figure of the sublime.**
 - Then if the monster is meant to be a villain, then the sublime is a villain too.
 - Just like the sublime, the monster is too big, too powerful to be human

- **That said, the monster is sensitive to the beautiful :**
 - bird song, music(139), and then the spring (149-150) etc.
 - Then he seems to represent a defense of beauty if he is deemed good, etc.

- **The beauties of the cottage family**
 - pleasure when he discovers birds's singing (133), human voice and music (139), reading (141)
 - (140) beauty is "slight", "graceful" and with "finest symetry"
 - Contrast with when the monster sees himself (147)
 - pleasure felt with the spring (Chap XII, 149-150)
 1. flowers, beauty of nature, clear skies – see also, where he says flowers, birds, and all the rest that summer brings were his chief delight
 2. this is all the language of beauty, rather than the sublime
 3. See also the summer p.173

- **Later on, when the monster has turn bad, he is no longer able to appreciate the beautiful:** all sight of beauty seems a mockery and provokes pain and rage.(187)

Thus, the message seems to be that:

- the sublime, praised by the romantics, is dehumanizing
- the beautiful is human

Note that the monster finds the idea of a rebellion against his creator in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (170).

5.4 Is Shelley the advocate of the conservative reaction against the Enlightenment?

5.4.1 The Bible?

It seems that most of what we could take to be Rousseau's in the book could be read in biblical terms:

- Note that the child is described as an “innocent and helpless creature bestowed on them by Heaven [...]”
- Note Elizabeth's description as an angel (33-4)
- departure to Ingolstadt: loss of innocence with knowledge
- Meeting the monster: biblical language (thy etc.), from Adam to Satan, the “fallen angel”
- Then the whole story of the monster can be read along biblical lines.
 - The cottage is then a symbol of the garden of Eden
 - Loss of innocence when he meets humans, and life of suffering

So, one reading would be that Shelley defends the ideal of the Bible against the perversion of human vice (including his romantic friends). That said, she could also make a point to criticize the reactionary views of the Church.

5.4.2 Shelley and Feminism

The relation to feminism is complex.

- Safie is clearly a feminist figure:
 - mother, independant woman
 - education to freedom and knowledge
 - hopes to lead an independent and real intellectual life

5.4. IS SHELLEY THE ADVOCATE OF THE CONSERVATIVE REACTION AGAINST THE ENLIGHTENMENT?

That said, all other feminine figures are depressingly dull and dependent on men:

- Frankenstein's mother
- Elizabeth, who is given as a "gift" to the young Victor
- Agatha in the cottage: cleaning all day
- the way the monster considers his "right" to have a partner, and never considers that she might have other ideas for her life than his.

Still, let say that Safie's story is an important one.

5.4.3 Shelley and other cultures

Shelley seems very culture-centered. It is rather chocking how she describes other cultures than hers.

- Remember the description of the little Italian kids as "little vagrants" in comparison to the blond-hair-blue-eyed angel Elizabeth, who is said to be from a "distinct species"!!!
- The Turkish figure:
 - merchant: caricature – money minded, no moral values
 - proposes money for a noble deed accomplished in the name of justice – obviously does not get the point...
 - deceitful: empty promises, even to someone who saved his life
 - takes benefits of the de Lacey's misfortune
 - tyrannic with his daughter
- Islam versus Christianity
 - Women: were Christian societies keener on educated women because they were Christian?
 - Intolerance for mixed wedding: would not it be the case the other way around?
 - Money and Honor: can we assure that to be a Christian implies that one prefers money over morality?

5.4.4 In contrast: The French Enlightenment

The issue of how we can judge other cultures has been around since the discovery of the new world (see Montaigne for example, and Valladolid controversy (1550-1551) about the humanity of the native Americans) It was renewed again with the colonization and slavery. A lot of philosophers put into question:

- the idea of higher/lower cultures
- above all, the idea that we are in a position to judge other cultures without prejudice

In the *Persian Letters* for example, Montesquieu (French philosopher, most importantly known for his political theories, in particular advocating the separation of the three powers) shows how one's cultural prejudices make it very difficult to judge other cultures. To do that, he has two Persians characters discovering and describing our societies. Not only this is a way to criticize our society but also to see, in the basis of the Persians's misunderstanding, how we would misunderstand Persia!

Example: Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, 29

From <http://www.wm.edu/history/rbsche/plp/letter29.html>: "The following is an electronic text of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721). The edition is by John Davidson, who translated the novel, wrote an introduction to it and added explanatory footnotes. It was published by Gibbings & Company in London in 1899 (3 vols.) and is therefore in the public domain."

LETTER XXIX

Rica to Ibben, at Smyrna

The Pope is the head of the Christians: an old idol, kept venerable by custom. Formerly he was feared even by princes; for he deposed them as easily as our glorious sultans depose the kings of Irimetta and Georgia. He is, however, no longer dreaded. He declares himself to be the successor of one of the first Christians, called Saint Peter: and it is certainly a rich succession; for he possesses immense treasures, and a large territory owns his sway. The bishops are the administrators under his rule, and they exercise, as his subordinates, two very different functions. In their

5.4. *IS SHELLEY THE ADVOCATE OF THE CONSERVATIVE REACTION AGAINST THE ENLIC*

corporate capacity they have, like him, the right to make articles of faith. Individually, their sole duty is to dispense with the observance of these articles. For you must know that the Christian religion is burdened with an immense number of very tedious duties: and, as it is universally considered less easy to fulfill these than to have bishops who can dispense with their fulfillment, the latter method has been chosen for the benefit of the public. Thus, if any one wishes to escape the fast of Rhamazan¹, or is unwilling to submit to the formalities of marriage, or wishes to break his vows, or to marry within the prescribed degrees, or even to forswear himself, all he has to do is to apply to a bishop, or to the Pope, who will at once grant a dispensation.

The bishops do not make articles of faith for their own government. There are a very great number of learned men, for the most part dervishes², who raise new questions in religion among themselves: they are left to discuss them for a long time, and the dispute lasts until a decision terminates it.

I can also assure you that there never was a realm in which so many civil wars have broken out, as in the kingdom of Christ. Those who first propound some new doctrine, are immediately called heretics. Each heresy receives a name which is the rallying cry of those who support it. But no one need be a heretic against his will: he only requires to split the difference, and allege some scholastic subtlety to those who accuse him of heresy; and, whether it be intelligible or not, that renders him as pure as the snow, and he may insist upon his being called orthodox.

What I have told you holds good only in France and Germany: for I have heard it affirmed that in Spain and Portugal there are certain dervishes who do not understand raillery, and who cause men to be burned as they would burn straw. Happy the man, who, when he falls into the hands of these people, has been accustomed to finger little balls of wood³ while saying his prayers, who has carried on his person two pieces of cloth attached to two

¹Lent

²Applied by Montesquieu's Persians to the friars, especially to the Jesuits.

³A Rosary.

ribbons⁴, and who has paid a visit to a province called Galicia⁵. Without that, a poor devil is in a wretched plight. Although he should swear like a Pagan that he is orthodox, they may very likely decline to admit his plea, and burn him for a heretic. Much good his scholastic subtlety will do him! They will none of it; he will be burned to ashes before they would dream of even giving him a hearing.

Other judges assume the innocence of the accused; these always deem them guilty. In dubious cases, their rule is to lean to the side of severity, apparently because they think mankind desperately wicked. And yet, when it suits them, they have such a high opinion of mankind, that they think them incapable of lying; for they accept as witnesses, mortal enemies, loose women, and people whose trade is infamous. In sentencing culprits, they pay them a little compliment. Having dressed them in brimstone shirts, they assure them that they are much grieved to see them in such sorry attire; that they are tender-hearted, abhorring bloodshed, and are quite overcome at having to condemn them. Then these heart-broken judges console themselves by confiscating to their own use all the goods of their miserable victims. Oh, happy land, inhabited by the children of the prophets! There such woe-ful sights as these are unknown⁶. There, the holy religion which angels brought protects itself by innate truth; it can maintain itself without recourse to violent means like these.

Paris, the 4th of the moon of Chalval, 1712.

5.5 The end of the story: the monster's demand

The Text (191):

- monster demands that Victor create him a woman as his right
 - a. how can this be a right? 1.) that is, how can a man have a right to a woman? 2.) Do needs create rights?

⁴A scapulary.

⁵The pilgrmage to Saint James of Compostella.

⁶The Persians are the most tolerant of all the Mohammedans. – (M.)

- b. What does Shelley expect us to think about this?
- Victor at first refuses, fearing that another such creation would be just as wicked and help him in his wicked deeds
 - The monster argues that he is evil because he is unhappy and that if Victor were to make him happy, he would no longer be bad (191-2) [130]
 - a. he says he is shunned by mankind (192) [130]
 - b. he blames Victor: "you are the cause" of my unhappiness, he says (192) [131]
 - c. "My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor" (195) [133] – it seems the monster no more accepts responsibility for his actions than does Victor
 - monster promises to go away if Victor creates a female for him (193) [131]
 - Victor at first cannot bring himself to trust him, but then changes his mind (194ff) [132ff]
 - a. feeling obligated both to his monster and to mankind (196) [133]
 - b. monster swears to uphold his promise

Why can we say that Victor is in a tragic situation? What are the characteristic of a tragic situation, of a "tragic couple"? More on this in the next chapter...

