

# Chapter 6

## Frankenstein's story and last letters

### 6.1 Readings and Homework

- Readings: Chap. XVIII-XXIV, last letters
- Homework: Study Questions
  1. What do you think is the message conveyed by Clerval's speech (207-208)?
  2. What makes Frankenstein and the monster a tragic couple according to you?
  3. Compare the two speeches of Frankenstein p.286 and p.291-2. How do you understand the contrast?
  4. Frankenstein does not find his conduct blame worthy at the very end. Do you find his argument convincing?
  5. After the monster's speech, Walton calls him an hypocrite. What would be your reaction? why?

### 6.2 Action and notes on the way

#### 6.2.1 Frankenstein's story, resumed

From Prof. Schmaus Notes:

**Chapter XVIII (199) [135]**

- A. sets off for England to make the female (203) [137]
- B. traveling down the Rhine with Clerval, Clerval draws the contrast between the beautiful and the sublime (207-8) [141]
  - 1. the passage Steiner quotes in the introduction (xviii)
  - 2. the beautiful places have a spirit more in harmony with humankind (208) [141]

**Chapter XIX (211) [143]**

- A. travelling through England, the sympathy he expresses while in Oxford for the Stuarts is curious – it reflects Mary Shelley's own sympathies (213-5) [144-5]
- B. he reflects on how neither the beautiful nor the sublime any longer bring him the pleasure they did when he was younger (214) [145]
  - 1. as they travel North, the scenery comes to resemble the sublime landscape of Switzerland more and more (215) [146]
  - 2. the company of others brings him less pleasure than it does Clerval – Victor seeks solitude (216ff) [146ff]

**Chapter XX (221) [150]**

- A. Second thoughts
  - 1. Victor realizes that the female monster he would create is not bound by any compact he has made with the first monster
    - a. a kind of macabre feminism: she would have rights independent of first monster
    - b. monster assumes the female would be his property to do with as he pleases – compare to Victor's earlier sense that he "owns" Elizabeth (35) [21]
  - 2. Victor also realizes his responsibilities to humanity and subsequent generations (222) [150-1]
    - a. assuming his monsters mated [150]
    - b. that it would be selfish to placate the monster at the cost to future generations [150-1]
- B. destroys the new creation in front of the original monster, angering him (223) [151]
  - 1. monster swears to take revenge on Victor's wedding night (225) [153]

2. which unfortunately Victor interprets as a threat against his own life (226) [153]

C. after he dumps the body parts at sea, his skiff drifts over to Ireland

### **Chapter XXI (234ff) [159ff]**

A. Victor jailed in Ireland for murder of Henry, but freed, and returns home with his father.

B. Victor is taking laudanum (247) [168], same drug that Coleridge used

### **Chapter XXII (249) [169]**

A. again, Victor gets no pleasure from company of other people

B. tells father that he is responsible for death of William, Justine, and Henry, but his father does not understand (250-1) [169]

### **Chapter XXIII (263) [178]**

A. monster kills Elizabeth on their wedding-night, Victor having left her alone (264) [179]

B. Victor sets off for Geneva, concerned about the safety of his father and Ernest (267) [180]

C. his father dies of unhappiness (268) [181-2]

D. finally admits creation of his monster to a judge, who offers little hope the monster can be caught (269ff) [182ff]

E. Victor resolves to seek revenge on his own. His thirst for revenge becomes his new all-consuming passion (271-2) [184]

### **Chapter XXIV (273) [185]**

A. monster gleefully overhears Victor swear revenge at his family's grave site (274-5) [186]

B. Victor pursues him all over Europe and Asia (275ff) [186ff]

1. confuses his dreams of his family and friends with the reality of the pursuit of the monster (277) [188]

2. speaks of pursuit as enjoined by heaven, as due to some "mechanical impulse," separating himself from responsibility (277-8) [188]

C. monster torments Victor, leaving him messages and even food so that he will continue the pursuit (278) [188]

1. leads him on to the icy north
2. the landscape – "wild and rugged" (279) [189], "immense and rugged" (281) [190] – is again that of the sublime aesthetic experience
3. pursuit continues by dogsled over the frozen sea-ice, where he encounters Walton's ship (279-83) [190-2]
  - E. Victor asks Walton to swear revenge on the monster if he should die, but without being selfish enough to ask Walton to undergo his hardships (283) [192]

## 6.2.2 Walton's last letter

- I. Letter dated Aug. 26 (284) [192]
  - A. describes how Victor finds solace only in his dreams about his family and friends, which he takes to be their communications to him from the beyond (286) [193]
  - B. makes a speech contrasting his former high ambitions with the depths to which he has presently sunk (286-7) [194]
- II. Letter dated Sept. 2 (288) [195]
  - A. stuck in "mountains of ice," Walton blames his "mad schemes" (288-9) [195-6]
  - B. would he have called them that before he knew Victor Frankenstein?
- III. Letter dated Sept. 5 (290) [196]
  - A. Walton's crew members begin to die
  - B. a delegation asks him to discontinue voyage and to return home if they are ever set free from the ice (290-1) [196-7]
  - C. upon hearing this, Victor Frankenstein makes a speech to them invoking honor, glory, and courage in the face of danger and death (291-2) [197]
    1. using the language of the beautiful versus the sublime: "Not because the way was smooth and placid as a southern sea, but because it was full of dangers and terror" (291) [197]
    2. it seems puzzling that he would make such a speech given his earlier warnings to Walton against such all-consuming passions
    3. but Mary Shelley wants to show us how this aesthetic of the sublime is driving Victor to his very end
- IV. Letter dated Sept. 7: Walton grudgingly consents to return if freed from the ice (293) [198]
- V. Letter dated Sept. 12 (293) [198]

A. when the ice breaks, Walton gives in to his crew and sets about to return to England (293-4) [199]

B. Victor wants to continue the pursuit, but he is dying

C. Victor's dying speech (294-5) [199]

1. does not find his conduct blamable! (295) [199]

a. attributes creation of monster to "enthusiastic madness" (note 18th century meaning) (295) [199]

b. although duty-bound to make his creation happy, his duties to humanity had a greater claim on him. Did right to refuse to make female monster [200]

2. tells Walton to avoid ambition even in science (296) [200]

D. monster comes on board Walton's ship (297) [201]

1. expresses grief, remorse (297-8) [202]

2. Walton remonstrates with him, saying that if he had listened to his conscience, Victor would still be alive (298) [202]

3. monster answers that he had felt remorse even in the act of killing

a. "My heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy . . ."

b. that is, like mankind, was created good.

c. Misery made him evil

d. And, like Victor, claims to have been the slave of his impulses (299) [202]

4. Walton calls him a hypocrite, saying that he would continue to torment Victor if he were still alive (299-300) [203]

5. monster asks Walton if he is the only criminal (301) [204]

a. what about Felix, or the father of the girl he saved from drowning? (301) [204]

b. but the monster does not so much cast blame for his own actions on them as suggest that they share his guilt

c. admits to murder of innocents, that he is a wretch, and that he has sinned

D. monster says that his killing of others is over, that he will go off and kill himself, and departs (302ff) [204ff]

End of Prof. Schmaus Notes

### 6.3 The beautiful and the sublime, finally

It becomes now clear that Shelley is advocating the aesthetics of the beautiful over the one of the sublime. In particular:

- Contrast Clerval and Frankenstein concerning the ability of enjoying the beauties of nature:

This is what it is to live (205)

See again 213 – solitude and dehumanization

- Clerval's speech is explicitly in favor of the beautiful. Contrasting the sublime of the Swiss mountains with the Riverside of Germany, he admits that, even if the former are more impressive the simple sight of simple beauties is all what brings happiness.

Oh, surely, the spirit that inhabits this place has a soul more in harmony with man than those who pile the glacier, or retire to the inaccessible peaks of the mountains of our own country (208)

- Frankenstein and the monster, two sublime figures, torture each other, and end up finding their respective lives not blamable.

Conclusion could be: there is something wrong about the romantic sublime esthetics. It produces young irresponsible men full of pride.

### 6.4 Is Shelley the advocate of Rousseau's ideas?

It is a great and beautiful spectacle to see a man somehow emerging from oblivion by his own efforts, dispelling with the light of his reason the shadows in which nature had enveloped him, rising above himself, soaring in his mind right up to the celestial regions, moving, like the sun, with giant strides through the vast extent of the universe, and, what is even greater and more difficult, returning to himself in order to study man there and learn of his nature, his obligations, and his end. All of these marvelous things have been renewed in the past few generations.

Two quotes from Rousseau:

Where there is no effect, there is no cause to look for. But here the effect is certain, the depravity real, and our souls have

become corrupted to the extent that our sciences and our arts have advanced towards perfection. Will someone say that this is a misfortune peculiar to our age? No, gentlemen. The evils brought about by our vain curiosity are as old as the world. The daily ebb and flow of the ocean's waters have not been more regularly subjected to the orbit of the star which gives us light during the night than the fate of morals and respectability has been to progress in the sciences and arts.\* We have seen virtue fly away to the extent that their lights have risen over our horizon, and the same phenomenon can be observed at all times and in all places. (*Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*)

Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Authors of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man. (*Émile*)

### 6.4.1 Walton's and Frankenstein's stories and Rousseau

#### What is it to be human?

Shelley emphasizes the importance of the relations to others and of friendship. *Humanity goes with relationships to others.*

- Walton expresses desire for companionship, for society (10-1).
- Link with Rousseau's ideas?
  - The need for friendship is not in agreement with Rousseau's ideas.
  - That said, the people of which Walton enjoys the company are hardly "civilized". So that one can think of the boat as the place of a state of nature and the crew as an ideal community (11-2).
- Walton admires his lieutenant: a man, who, through lack of cultivation, retains "noblest endowments of humanity" (12). This means that education is not necessary to goodness.
- Similarly the master of his ship:
  - also uneducated, yet "gentle and mild" with the crew
  - also, responsible for a noble, romantic deed (12-3): not only intercedes with the father of his intended in favor of the one she favors, but turns over the farm (13)

- This means that you don't need to have moral lessons, or to learn ethics in the books to know what to act in the right (altruist and just) way.

*The uneducated man is a good man:* Rousseau, again

- Contrast with the irony with which Shelley make Walton describe Frankenstein. Walton believes he can find a friend in the well-educated Dr. Frankenstein, whose he admires the eloquence as well as the intellectual penetration. But we will see that Frankenstein is dangerous, and, moreover, pretty much a coward. Educated people might thus be deceptive, against all appearances.

Now, what about Frankenstein?

### Frankenstein's youth as an education à la Rousseau

- Geneva represents the ideal republic cf p. 78, where Elizabeth in her letter to Victor compares republic of Geneva to monarchies of England, France
- Characteristics of Frankenstein's parents: benevolence, tenderness, and care
- The child appears as a creature to bring up to good etc. Education that could be like the one of *Émile*.

### 6.4.2 The Monster's story and Rousseau

- Shelley puts Rousseau's ideas in the Monster's mouth.
  - if the monster is good, then the book can be interpreted as praising Rousseau's ideas
  - if the monster is meant to be a villain, then the book shows how Rousseau's ideas are misleading.
- The cottage
  - A. although at first the monster steals food from the people in the cottage, he later refrains from doing this when he sees how poor they are and even helps them by getting firewood (144)



B. the family in the cottage

1. loving and kind, although at first there is a certain unhappiness
2. contrast the dutiful way in which the brother and sister serve their father – even feeding him when they have nothing for themselves (143) – with the romantic rejection of authority

C. cottage is the scene of his education

1. first hears music (139)
2. then books being read (141)
3. then learns their language (144ff)

D. he's fairly happy: this could be the state of nature – his is to be contrasted with his first two experience of human being: one runs away, the other stones him.

- The monster's education: Education and knowledge bring sorrow, even agony (157). See also 172.
    - interpretation in terms of Rousseau's philosophy: education brings a form of perversion.
    - Indeed, it seems that the monster is perverted by his readings:
      - a. gets the idea of murder, massacres and inequalities in learning about human societies and public affairs in Plutarch (156)
      - b. gets the idea to identify himself with Satan in Milton. He then takes the role of the romantic rebel, which is not so nice for the romantics...(170)
      - c. contrasts this with his learning about natural love (158)
- So, one interpretation is to see the monster's story as illustrating Rousseau's ideas.

### 6.4.3 What is the message?

There are obvious references to Rousseau: what to make of them?

Whatever the interpretation, we have to make sense of the scene when the ideal people from the ideal cottage reject the monster only because its appearance (176-178). Note that traditionally, the blind man is the wise man. Here the blind man expresses Rousseau's ideas, but these are immediately

proved void of content by the fact that Felix beats the monster, driving him into hiding for ever, and further initiating the series of murders.

Is this irony? A critic of the ideal of the state of nature? Or do we have to understand that the monster is the only good human? Is man naturally good according to Shelley?

One interpretation could be that Shelley puts the idea that humans are naturally good into question, through the cottage's, and the monster's stories.

See p.156: is man really good??

Of course, we should not expect Shelley to give us a definite answer on the subject!

## 6.5 Is *Frankenstein* a Tragedy?

To define what is tragedy is complex, as is to define any literary genre. One way to try to grasp what is tragedy is to see the different historical layers:

- The classical origin: Aristotle's definition of tragedy from the *Poetics*, ch. 13:

A perfect tragedy should, . . . moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. There remains, then, the character between these two extremes- that of a man who is not eminently good and

just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty.

We can distinguish the following characteristic of the classical (Greek) tragedy:

- Action having magnitude
- Some reversal of fortune for the hero
- the hero is:
  - 1- neither good or bad
  - 2- close enough to the reader so that identification is possible
  - 3- but also superior in some way (ambition, hopes or aims etc.) – not the lay man in the street – but someone you could dream to be
  - 4- responsible for a tragic error in judgement – often *hubris*, or excessive pride – which makes him ignore a divine warning or break a moral law (even with good intentions).
- From there on, the action follows, as a consequence of the tragic flaw
- Notion of implacable destiny or fate
- The Elizabethan period renewed the notion of tragedy (Age of Shakespeare)
  - Elizabeth's reign: 1558-1603, flourishing economy and cultural boom in England
  - From the French classics and baroque: the hero is really superior, has some high and noble aim and hopes.
  - The main contribution to the notion of tragedy is to add the idea of revenge as a tragic action.
- Also, part of tragedy is the idea of the impossible conflict: the hero(s) has (have) different options, none of which is acceptable. The hero is forced to choose something terrible.

All this clearly applies not only to Frankenstein, but also to the couple Creator/Creature, especially in this last part of the novel: their destinies are tied together. They cannot live together. But they cannot separate from one another either. They are condemned to suffer and have the other suffer.

That said, it is not clear whether Mary Shelley advocate such tragic description. She might make us understand that such speeches about destiny, fate do nothing but give individuals the opportunity to run away from their responsibility. This applies both to Frankenstein and the Monster.