

Chapter 3

Frankenstein and Romanticism

3.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: *Frankenstein*
- Study question:
 1. Select relevant passages (quote page, beginning and ending) illustrating Shelley aesthetic ideas about the beautiful and the sublime.
 2. Select relevant passages (quote page, beginning and ending) illustrating Shelley ideas about the figure of the romantic hero.
 3. Select relevant passages (quote page, beginning and ending) illustrating Shelley ideas about Rousseau's view of human nature.

3.2 Beautiful vs. Sublime

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.

3.2.1 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

3.2.2 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

3.2.3 The monster: Shelley's use of the Sublime

- **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.

- **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

- **Sublime creation of life**

- Frankenstein brings the thing to life on a rainy night in November

- it inspires horror in him – a sublime experience again (67)

- has a nightmare of Elizabeth turning into his mother’s corpse, awakes to discover his monster in his room, looking at him (67)

- 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)

In general, sublime setting every single time the monster appears.

- **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)!!

3.2.4 Frankenstein brought back to full human life

- 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
 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)

3.2.5 Frankenstein's 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.

3.2.6 Clerval's speech

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.

3.3 Shelley and Rousseau's ideas

3.3.1 Rousseau...

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*)

3.3.2 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?

3.3.3 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*.

3.3.4 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.

3.3.5 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!

3.3.6 ...or 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.

3.4 Shelley and the romantic hero

3.4.1 Walton

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.)

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.

3.4.2 **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.
 - 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)
- 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.
 - NOTE that the same applies to the monster !!

3.5 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!

