

COMMEMORATING THE 225TH BIRTHDAY OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY ON 30 AUGUST

Disrupted Nature and Community in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

Most of the time, Frankenstein’s attitude toward nature is like a master who would like to look at the world as his possession. He turns to nature passionately after the death of his youngest brother William, “Dear mountains! my own beautiful lake! how do you welcome your wanderer?” Instead of enjoying nature as it is, earlier he dared to tamper with it, and now he wails plaintively at the natural world which is indifferent toward his misery.

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Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) is well-known to the literary audience and beyond as the tale of a brilliant and mad scientist who created a horrible monster that in the end brought destruction for its creator. There have been a number of movies based on Frankenstein and his monster, not all of which adhere to the original storyline. But the theme most emphasized has surely been the Promethean spirit of Romanticism which is explored through the two principal narrators, namely, Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein. Yet this story is also about the danger that involves in playing Prometheus, as Victor realizes after creating life from the abode of the dead. Like most Romantics of her time, Mary Shelley held a deep reverence for nature, and her *Frankenstein* emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balance between nature and humanity. The novel explores devastating aspects of nature when its boundaries are violated and unnatural rites are practiced.

The narration begins with Walton’s reference to Coleridge’s albatross,



and untimely deaths complete Victor’s dissociation from nature. Through the character of Ernest, Victor’s other brother, Mary Shelley further emphasizes the importance of the sustaining power of nature. Not surprisingly, Ernest is the only member of Frankenstein family who survives the tragedy that overwhelms his other family members.

The aspiration and failure of Victor Frankenstein thus focus on the futility of an ambition devoid of human compassion. His failure can then be seen as his lack of understanding in the unity of the elements of the universe, of which nature is an essential part. For Victor, the creation of his creature was a scientific process of anatomy that required little understanding of nature and life. He also forgot all about ethical and aesthetic considerations.

The most celebrated idea of Romanticism is thought of as an individual experience, as the six major male Romantic poets prioritized the rise of the individual over the group. However, there are hundreds of other writers of the time, both male and female, who tells other stories behind the “romantic sublime,” seeing it as more of a shared tale of mutual understanding and partnership not just between men and women, but between the solitary and the community, and keeping a balance between nature and humanity.

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In spite of his egocentric views of the world, Victor is not unaware of the healing power of nature. Whenever he refers to his childhood in Geneva, he remembers the beautiful mountains and green pastures surrounding his father’s house. But in his narration, it also becomes clear that in his zeal of creating life, for a time, he had managed to have forgotten nature. Mesmerized by the power of nature manifested through lightning, he wanted to possess it without understanding the responsibility that is required with its handling.

As mythical Prometheus taught mankind, his own creation, the use of fire, Victor, uses the secret of electricity (another form of fire) to breathe into his monster. However, unlike Prometheus he lacks foresight, and therefore, instead of being saved by his creation, is hounded by it. By the end of his sorry tale, he becomes the identical lightning struck tree that inspired

him with his scientific ventures: “But I am a blasted tree; the bolt has entered my soul; and I felt then that I should survive to exhibit, what I shall soon cease to be—a miserable spectacle of wrecked humanity, pitiable to others, and abhorrent to myself.”

Anne Mellor astutely observes, “Nature pursues Victor Frankenstein with the very electricity he has stolen. Lightning, thunder, and rain rage around him. The November night on which he steals the ‘spark of being,’ from nature is dreary, dismal and wet.”

Most of the time, Frankenstein’s attitude toward nature is like a master who would like to look at the world as his possession. He turns to nature passionately after the death of his youngest brother William, “Dear mountains! my own beautiful lake! how do you welcome your wanderer?” Instead of enjoying nature as it is, earlier he dared to tamper with it, and now he wails plaintively at the natural world which is indifferent toward his misery. Reared and spoilt by the attention of his family and friends, Victor is invariably the center of his own world. His egotistical concern with himself shows itself at its extreme when he busies himself with creating the female creature in a remote Scottish island. There, while he scoffs at the wretched living condition of the islanders, his ego is pricked as they don’t show him

enough gratitude for taking up his abode among them. Even though hailed by Walton as a noble creature with the capacity of “elevating his soul from earth” (16), he is actually an outcast mirroring his monster. Because of his unnatural birth, the monster is unwelcomed in human society, and similarly, because of his transgression and ego-centric vision of the world, Victor is a stranger to nature.

Thus, the creator and the creation entreat the two worlds whose doors are tightly closed for them. Ironically enough, whenever Victor tries to embrace nature imploring it to sustain him, almost as an answer he finds his monstrous creation in the vicinity reminding him how usurping the powers of nature, he had created a grotesque and unnatural being. It seems that the creature itself becomes an agent of nature bringing about his retribution.

Even though she focuses much on the devastating powers of nature, Mary Shelly strikes a balance by revealing its nourishing and nurturing aspects as well. Through the characters of Henry Clerval, Elizabeth Lavenza, and Ernest Frankenstein, she elucidates this harmonious relationship between nature and human beings. Victor’s wife Elizabeth appreciates and loves little things of nature as does his best friend Henry, but their unfortunate

For many readers, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is a tale quite relevant to the waste land of the 21st century. In our quest for achieving the unachievable, we, too, have destroyed lives, breached sacred relations, and reversed the natural order of things. Would it be too pessimistic to say that the monstrosity of our actions will get us too? Or, perhaps, we are delusional enough to think of rousing ourselves and restore the lost balance.

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TWO POEMS BY
MOHAMMAD SHAFIQU
ISLAM

I wish the world were a painting



Now I wonder the world is a painting,
an imaginary chamber where captives sing,
like a caged dove obeying a hunter
enticing free birds to live in bliss.
And then I see darkness of dusk fade away
as the sun begins to peek in the east.
So my reverie seems to break off
and I realize it’s real it’s real it’s real.
Suddenly Picasso passes me by whispering
Feel and be silent, feel and implode.
A storm unsettles the unconscious drawing
a grey line between real and unreal—
something else eases an inner epidemic.
Poetry heals, poetry is a fount of recovery.
I wish the world were right a painting.

Love at Second Sight

Dream is a mystery sometimes unfolded
amidst creeping eeriness
unstipulated to the seemingly compos mentis.
As long as my stint in your thought
bears a meaning for life
because I wish to worship the sanctity
of your feeling for me and tree,
clouds wait for a breeze and soft rain soaks
a parched soul and dry land
scattering the smell of sopping mud.
Lava doesn’t count on you or me
when it needs to flare up
but the sky is safe from wrath and damage.
Looking at a twinkling star,
you may have a different perspective
as you reckon differently
but even a second sight of a child
makes them imagine a winged horse
on which they travel faster
to sky and catch the lambent light of the star.
At the end of a rough day
when evening descends in high spirits
a second chance captivates you.
A pull towards a second soul always appeals
a traveller, an eternal traveller,
rambling alone for months and years
along creepy streets, through dark woods.

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