



Playing God: The Ethics of Creation in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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"لعب دور الإله: أخلاقيات الخلق في رواية فرانكنشتاين لماري شيلي"

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الملخص

تناقش هذه الدراسة التداخليات الأخلاقية والطموح العلمي في رواية فرانكنشتاين لماري شيلي، من منظور تقاربهما في نهاية المطاف في الأدب والعلم والفلسفة الأخلاقية. تعتمد الدراسة أسلوبًا قائمًا على التحليل الأدبي المصحوب بنقد أخلاقي حيوي، وتناقش فعل التقديم المتجاوز ليفكتور فرانكنشتاين كاستعارة للتطور الطبي الجامح والغطرسة البشرية. يُسائل تصوير شيلي لـ"بروميثيوس المتطور" بدقة الحدود التي تُحدد مدى وضوح الفهم بين البشرية وإبداعاتها؛ والمسؤوليات الملقاة على عاتق المبدعين تجاه منتجات الإبداع اللاحقة؛ والنتائج المرهقة التي تُحفزها الابتكارات التي تُتبع دون مراعاة الاعتبارات الأخلاقية. يُنظر إلى رواية فرانكنشتاين كتحذير من مخاطر العيش دون مراعاة أو تعاطف أو مسؤولية أخلاقية، وذلك من خلال قراءات متعمقة، ومعايير عصر التنوير والرومانسية، وإشارات بينية (لا سيما الفردوس المفقود وفاوست)، وأطر فلسفية تشمل أخلاقيات كانط وإنسانية ما بعد عصر التنوير. يشجع هذا النص على الحوار حول قضايا الأخلاقيات الحيوية المتعلقة بمواضيع مثل الذكاء الاصطناعي، والهندسة الوراثية، وعلم الأحياء التركيبي. كما يؤكد على مدى أهميتها في الخطاب العلمي الحديث.

Abstract

This study discusses the moral implications of scientific ambition in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* from the vantage point in their eventual convergence in literature, science, and ethical philosophy. It adopts an technique based on literary



analysis included with a bioethical critique and discusses Victor Frankenstein's transgressive act of introduction as a metaphor for unrestrained medical improvement and human hubris. Shelley's representation of the 'cutting-edge Prometheus' severely interrogates the bounds that define legibility comprehended between humanity and its creations; responsibilities owed via creators to consequent merchandise of advent; burdening outcomes prompted with the aid of innovation pursued sans attendant ethical concerns. Frankenstein is examine as a caution against the risks of making existence with out consideration, empathy, or ethical duty, with the aid of close readings, Enlightenment and Romantic standards, intertextual references (mainly Paradise Lost and Faust), and philosophical frameworks inclusive of Kantian ethics and submit-Enlightenment humanism. This text encourages dialogue about problems in bioethics that relate to topics consisting of artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and synthetic biology. It additionally emphasizes how very applicable it is still in phrases of modern scientific discourse.

Keywords: Mary Shelley. *Frankenstein*. Ethics of Creation. Bioethical Critique

1. Introduction

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), long considered the textual content of technological know-how fiction, is much more than a cautionary story about clinical inquiry; it conducts an explicit philosophical research into moral obligation, and into the nature of creation and of human ambition for transcending all limits. A made of Enlightenment idea and within the midst of the Industrial Revolution, Shelley positions her novel within contemporary concerns of rapid technological advancement and the consequences of humanity beyond its fundamental limitations (Mellor,2012).

The novel's story is that of Victor Frankenstein, a genius scientist with obsessive inclinations who tries to overcome dying through giving life. His test effects in a creature rejected by means of society, misunderstood, and in the end pressured to violence.

Shelley uses Victor's narrative as an exploration of the outcomes that could be brought about with the aid of gambling God, rooting deep ethical questions about humanity's right to trade life and obligation in advent. Her novel encourages readers to assess whether the hunt for knowledge ought to be uninhibited or confined with ethics and social responsibilities. What responsibility does the creator owe to its introduction? How tons weight ought to morality have on medical innovation? Shelley's *Frankenstein* gives a critique of unchecked human aspiration as well as the hubris by way of reflecting on Victor's lack of ability to assume or manipulate the effects of his actions (Baldick,1990).

It will evaluation the manner in which Shelley vocalizes ethical conflicts within Victor's scientific work thru a thematic discussion on duty, isolation, and the abuse of electricity. This paper advances the argument that *Frankenstein*



transcends its gothic horror style to feature as an everlasting cautionary tale about what takes place whilst useful ethics are left out within the name of development (UZUN,2024).

2. Historical background

Frankenstein with the aid of Mary Shelley, first posted in 1818, does come from a period of top notch clinical advancement, philosophical exploration, and cultural upheaval. The early years of the nineteenth century had been years of sizeable transformation because they inherited the honor for reason from the Enlightenment while sharing the growing predominance of Romanticism that located so much strain on emotion, nature, and the inadequacies of human comprehension. It is in opposition to such philosophical backdrops that Shelley should frame her personal mind upon technology, advent, and ethics (Mellor,2012).

The emergence of modern-day technology, which passed off inside the 18th and early 19th centuries, could be very relevant to understanding the ethical troubles that happen inside the novel Frankenstein. This duration noticed brilliant increase in biology, chemistry, and physics with new theories about what life truly is. The experiments performed by way of Luigi Galvani and later his nephew Giovanni Aldini the usage of power to animate the muscle tissue of corpses shocked-as well as interested-the public. Research into "galvanism" changed into then proposed as a means thru which reanimation for the useless will be realized; it closely inspired the fictitious science behind Victor Frankenstein's monster (Noud,2013).

This narrative underscores broad social fears concerning human overreach and the consequences of transgressing natural boundaries. The Industrial Revolution has seen wonderful changes in society, combining human faculties with wonder and fear about the dehumanizing results the machine and unchecked growth. Shelley's life was closely tied to these issues closely; she was the daughter of the political philosopher William Godwin and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft and was brought up among great minds like Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron who keenly debated science, morals, and man's place in the universe (Gilbert,1978).

The spirit of the age weighs heavily on the moral issues the novel addresses. To 'play God' or assume a divine role in creation or alteration of life has encountered great antagonism, not only in theology but also in the intellectual realm. While Victor Frankenstein's creation seems parallel to the Genesis one, his creature, unlike Genesis, is justified in this case. Victor creates it and thereby fails to provide love or take care of it. Thus, he violates the moral responsibilities attached to that authority. Shelley is condemning such pride of science, which defies religious power yet does not embrace a correlate moral responsibility (Noud,2013).

Out of these a couple of layers of history and thought, Shelley created a tale that was, on the same time, timely and prophetic. While actively enticing the



immediate apprehensions of her period approximately science, morality, and human aspiration, Frankenstein also throws a shadow over future discussions in bioethics, artificial intelligence, and genetic engineering. Since she based totally her narrative on real scientific and highbrow advancements of the era she defined so eloquently, her work gives Frankenstein persevering with importance as an exploration of the venture to create lifestyles and the ethical consequences thereof (Mellor,2012).

3. Methodology

This study shall use qualitative literary analysis methodology, merging detailed textual analysis with ethical, philosophical, and historical interpretation. Qualitative analysis of selected extracts from Mary Shelley's Frankenstein that bring out the role of ethics in creation, power, and responsibility will be discussed herein. This paper would dwell on a few extracts to further emphasize how thematic analysis, character construction, plot development, and symbolic elements are used within Shelley's novel.

Jonas's theories are utilized to evaluate Victor Frankenstein's failure to anticipate the consequences of his actions and to fulfill his moral responsibilities towards his creation. It focuses on Romantic philosophy, particularly its repudiation of Enlightenment rationalism and its prioritization of the emotional, spiritual, and moral dimensions of human experience. Mery Shelley, situated at the confluence of Romanticism and early modern science, employs Victor's ambition to condemn the hubris inherent in Enlightenment-era scientific ideologies. The study examines intertextual connections with ancient mythology (e.g., Prometheus), Christian theology (e.g., the Fall of Man), and modern scientific discourse (e.g., galvanism), demonstrating how Shelley amalgamates these traditions to create a sophisticated ethical critique(Jonas,1984).

This interpretation is supported by various secondary sources, including literary criticism, moral philosophy and historical knowledge. Of these chief Anne K. Meller has a moral interpretation of feminist and Frankenstein, which outlines its prosecution of male scientific ambition and its disregard for relationship and care obligations. Additional important approaches explain Shelley's moral apprehensions within scientific modernity and broader discourse on the human agency (Kass,2008). This paradigm facilitates a broad, interdisciplinary analysis of Frankenstein as a piece of moral literature. This novel not only examines the work of a gothic story or an early science fiction, but also has a deep reflection on the moral boundaries of the dangers of unrestrained ambitious ambition and human simplicity. It is based in ethical theory, mostly on the concept of "playing God" the taking on creative powers normally attributed to divine or natural forces. This study uses bioethical frameworks, notably the concepts of Hans Jonas whose "imperative of responsibility" stressed ethical responsibilities for those who have technological or scientific power (Van den Belt,2003).

4. Discussion and Findings



4.1 The Ethics of Creation in *Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* offers a profound critique of the ethical consequences of creation, particularly when driven by unchecked ambition. Victor Frankenstein's aspiration to transcend natural boundaries and invigorate inanimate matter illustrates the Enlightenment-era conviction in rationality and scientific progress (UZUN, 2024). His failure to consider the ethical implications of his experiment reveals a substantial flaw in his character and in the broader scientific ethos. By evading emotional responsibility and societal accountability, Victor exemplifies the dangers of pursuing knowledge without ethical limitations, effectively "playing God" without consideration for the life he engenders.

Shelley contends that creation beyond simple technicality, encompassing moral and relational aspects. Victor's rejection of the Creature soon after its animation illustrates a profound ethical failure: the relinquishment of responsibility for one's creation. The Creature, left by both its creator and society, slowly turns to be more forlorn and angry. It does not turn to evil naturally but by pain and ill-treatment. Shelley has argued that makers, transcending all realms and extending to science, have a duty to cater to the emotional, social, and psychological needs of their creations. Responsibility commences with creation; it has no end (Mellor, 2012).

Frankenstein foreshadows contemporary bioethical debates such as those about genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, and synthetic biology. It puts forward a claim that disastrous consequences can result from the achievement of science if pursued without humanity and ethics in consideration. As much a work of Gothic fiction as of cautionary tales, Shelley's oeuvre retains its function even at a time of heightened levels of technological development. Like all great works of art, *Frankenstein* raises, for its readers long after the immediate shock has subsided questions regarding where limits to human intervention in natural processes might lie and what "great responsibilities" necessarily accompany creative power (Gilbert, 1978).

4.2. Victor Frankenstein as the Modern Prometheus

The subtitle of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is "The Modern Prometheus." The Modern Prometheus is not merely ornamental but crucial for understanding the novel's ethical and philosophical underpinnings. Shelley establishes a purposeful comparison between Victor Frankenstein and Prometheus, the mythological figure who appropriated fire from the gods for humanity, thereby linking ancient defiance with contemporary scientific desire. Both individuals violate established limits in pursuit of enlightenment, yet both endure significant repercussions for their excesses (Aeschylus, 1931). Thus, the Promethean myth serves as a framework for Shelley to examine the perils of unchecked intellectual ambition



and the moral void that may arise from scientific hubris. In classical mythology, Prometheus serves as a multifaceted emblem, embodying both rebellion and benevolence (Franssen, 2014). He bestows fire, emblematic of knowledge, science, and civilization, upon humanity, an act that both strengthens and disturbs the divine order. Likewise, Victor Frankenstein imparts a type of "fire" to the world through his discovery of the secret to creating life. His creation, however, results in isolation, pain, and mortality rather than advancement. As Prometheus faces retribution from Zeus for his transgression, Victor endures torment from his own conscience, the vengeance of his creation, and the disintegration of his family and prospects. Both characters endure consequences for exercising divine power; but, while Prometheus is a tragic hero, Victor emerges as a cautionary figure a man obliterated by the knowledge he aspired to control.

Victor's statements demonstrate his late recognition of the perils associated with unrestrained ambition: "Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge" (Shelley, 1818, Vol. 1, Ch. 4). This admission embodies the novel's moral caution. Victor aspires not only to acquire knowledge but also to attain mastery over life and death, a capability typically attributed to divine entities. In doing so, he evades the obligations of a genuine creator affection, diligence, and responsibility. His invention is driven not by empathy or foresight, but by a quest for glory and recognition, embodying the Romantic critique of Enlightenment rationalism detached from emotional and moral foundations.

The reason Shelley's Prometheus is regarded as "modern" is that his violation has scientific rather than mythological roots. Victor represents the scientist who, in his pursuit of achievement, ignores the human cost of innovation in a time of rapid technological advancement and growing faith in human reason. His act of creation is devoid of humility; he views the Creature as an experiment to be perfected or abandoned rather than as a being with rights or desires. Because nature was viewed as an object to be controlled rather than as a system to be understood and honored, this dehumanization exemplifies the hubris of the Enlightenment (Baldick, 1990).

Moreover, the Promethean concept is linked to broader intellectual and religious debates that were taking on at the time. Instead of seeing creation as an act of dominion, Christians see it as an expression of God's love. Victor disobeys natural law and messes with spiritual and ethical order by assuming this responsibility. Frankenstein is exiled for seeking forbidden knowledge, much like Adam, but unlike Adam, he is both a creator and a fallen man, a sufferer and a transgressor; his disregard of his creation is a mirror to the Fall of Man (Lew, 1991).

Consequently, the subtitle *The Modern Prometheus* emphasizes the novel's primary caution: the quest for knowledge devoid of moral and ethical constraints may result in disastrous outcomes. Victor in Shelley's narrative is not solely condemned for his curiosity, but for the hubris that disconnects intellect from



empathy. The Promethean myth serves as a powerful metaphor for the ethical quandaries associated with scientific creation, a concept that remains relevant in current discussions regarding artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and human augmentation Mellor,2012).

4.3 Responsibility Toward the Created

Victor Frankenstein's most significant ethical transgression lies not alone in his act of creation but in his total forsaking of the being he animates. He admits, "Unable to tolerate the appearance of the creature I had fashioned, I fled the room..." (Shelley, 1818, Volume 1, Chapter 5). This moment epitomizes the essence of Victor's ethical deterioration: he withdraws from the repercussions of his actions the minute his creation is brought to life, abandoning the Creature in a condition of complete vulnerability and bewilderment. His rejection stems not from any wrongdoing by the Creature but only from its look, indicating that Victor never genuinely contemplated the humanity or needs of the life he endeavored to animate.

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas posits that ethical obligation commences upon encountering the face of the Other, which necessitates a reaction, compassion, and acknowledgment. Victor's fleeing from the visage of his creation is a significant repudiation of this fundamental ethical duty. By neglecting to recognize the Creature as a being worthy of compassion and ethical regard, Victor fails to fulfill even the fundamental criteria of accountability (Freud,1919).

Anne K. Mellor substantiates this critique by asserting that "Frankenstein fails due to his refusal to assume responsibility for his own creation." He renounces both his parental and scientific obligations" (Mellor,2012). Victor's behavior can be interpreted as both a failed scientific pursuit and a failed parental act. In generating life, he adopts the paternal role yet neglects the requisite care and direction associated with it. The repercussions of this neglect are disastrous not only for the Creature but also for those whom Victor cherishes. Shelley employs this ethical failure to underscore the perils of creation devoid of compassion and to interrogate the boundaries of human dominion over life and existence.

4.4 The Consequences of Playing God

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein provides a chilling examination of the repercussions that ensue when humans transcend natural boundaries and wield divine abilities (Valdebenito Tihuel, 2023). Victor Frankenstein's ambition to generate life and conquer death a pursuit that contravenes the natural order culminates not in enlightenment or success, but in extensive tragedy. His actions precipitated a sequence of irrevocable events: his brother William is murdered, Justine is executed for a crime she did not commit, his friend Henry Clerval is slain, and ultimately, both Elizabeth and Victor's father also die. Every fatality results directly or indirectly from Victor's original act of creation and, more importantly, his refusal to assume responsibility for it. Shelley employs these successive tragedies to demonstrate the catastrophic consequences of scientific ambition lacking ethical vision (Aeschylus,1931).



Victor's demise exemplifies Hans Jonas' caution in *The Imperative of Responsibility*, whereby he contends that contemporary technological authority necessitates a novel ethical paradigm: "technology acts must be guided by a new ethics, commensurate with their new power" (Jonas,1984). Victor's technical prowess to instill life surpasses his moral consciousness. He generates life without regard for the sociological, emotional, or existential requirements of the entity he introduces into existence. Shelley critiques a form of Enlightenment rationality that prioritizes discovery and invention at the expense of empathy and moral judgment. Victor epitomizes the perilous repercussions that ensue when intellect is severed from morality.

Ironically, the Creature, rather than Victor, exhibits emotional intelligence, moral contemplation, and a need for human connection. In his articulate appeal, "I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel" (Shelley, 1818, Vol. 2, Ch. 1), the Creature employs both Biblical and Miltonic imagery to convey his existential dilemma. He was created with the anticipation of companionship, affection, and identification, yet was ultimately discarded, unwanted and without a name. Shelley puts to good use the words of the Creature in articulating the injustice that befalls a creature spurned of its love and recognition, before it finally turns into a melancholy villain out of its erstwhile benign state.

Also, Shelley blasts the Enlightenment idea of a scientist being objective. Victor's fever for collecting facts by experiment lessens his awareness of the human aspects in his labor. He does not see his test as the birth of a living being but as a way to gain personal acclaim. Unlike the Creature who starts life as shapeless and then turns into a morally complex person feeling loneliness, spurning, and yearning very deeply for love, this inversion contests assumptions about knowledge residing within scientific creators and argues that real responsibility is found not in the ability to create but rather in the willingness to nurture and understand what has been created (Franssen,2014).

Frankenstein finally puts forth the playing of God not as some cerebral accomplishment but a failure in morality through neglect of care, compassion, and duty. Indeed, Shelley's warning is most apt in this day of artificial intelligence, genetic manipulation, plus technologies that are rapidly advancing: creation without any ethical consideration begets unforeseen and irreversible damage.

4.5. Intertextual and Theological Implications

There are a lot of theological and intertextual concerns in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, notably when it talks about John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The Creature's perusal of Milton's epic influences how he views himself at a pivotal point in the book. This reveals how Shelley thinks about the difficult relationship between creator and creature. "I thought Satan was a better symbol of my suffering," the Creature says (Shelley, 1818, Vol. 2, Ch. 7). This identification demonstrates how alone he is: like Satan, he has been cast out, lost grace, and forced to live alone not because he is evil, but because his creator turned him



down. The Creature's perception of Satan, The antagonist in Paradise Lost, makes him look more like Adam because he is likewise rejected and set aside, which Shelley's use of Paradise Lost transcends mere literary device; it serves as a theological critique. In Milton's oeuvre, God meticulously makes Adam with purpose and a moral foundation (Noud,2013). Notwithstanding Adam's transgression, God sustains a relationship with him, providing atonement and meaning. In contrast, Victor Frankenstein brings his creation to life devoid of affection, lacking any aim beyond ambition, and fails to offer moral direction or companionship. This essential failing highlights Shelley's indictment of humanity's endeavor to wield godlike abilities; they are deficient not just in omniscience and omnipotence but also in the compassion and responsibility requisite of divinity.

Additionally, Shelley establishes a moral dichotomy between divine and human creation on Christian theology, God's act of creation is fundamentally good and intentional, grounded on love, providence, and enduring relationship. In contrast, Victor's behavior is impetuous, self-serving, and reckless. His terror upon animating the Creature "the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart" (Vol. 1, Ch. 5) signifies the moment of his complete failure as a creator. In contrast to God, Victor is incapable of accepting or loving his creation, and his desertion of the Creature signifies the inception of its misery and moral degradation.

Shelley positions the Creature as both Adam and Satan, so obscuring conventional distinctions between good and evil. The Creature emerges as a theologically ambiguous entity not intrinsically hideous, but become so by neglect and rejection. Victor is a defective deity who neglects even the fundamental duties of a creator. Shelley critiques the Enlightenment's reliance on human reason and power, positing that without moral and emotional insight, endeavors to "play God" always lead to pain.

5. Conclusion

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein functions as a cautionary narrative regarding the ethical dangers of scientific overreach and the moral obligations of creators. Shelley challenges the Enlightenment ideal of boundless progress by illustrating Victor Frankenstein's terrible failure and cautions against "playing God" devoid of compassion, foresight, or ethical responsibility. The story serves as a profound ethical examination, particularly pertinent in the context of genetic engineering and artificial intelligence.

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