

Example of essay on shelley and boccaccio on the source of meaning

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



One of the more fascinating traits of humanity is the tendency to reflect, and to create art on the basis of that reflection. Even in the days before writing, cave paintings and the oral tradition of storytelling demonstrated the ways that people expressed their feelings – taking the time after winning, even if only briefly, the struggle against the demands of subsistence to leave a product behind, for posterity. Even the earliest recorded examples of literature, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, poignantly express the struggles that humanity faced when dealing with such abstractions as mortality and grief. Even the most recent best sellers published last week may have cooler cover art and may use figurative language more intricately than that ancient poem, but the anger and grief that Gilgamesh feels when he stopped, for just a minute, to take a dip in a pool after his long, bloody quest to find the plant of immortality, only to have a snake eat it while his back is turned. The absurdity of life comes into high relief at this moment, and while the writings of Samuel Beckett, Joseph Heller and Sylvia Plath are just some of the many that will echo with this same theme, none will do it more vividly. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* are two works that also mirror this absurdity of existence, suggesting that what is important in life, and what gives life meaning, has a lot more to do with how we respond to what Hamlet would term the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (Shakespeare) than with what we are able to accumulate and acquire during our time on the planet.

One interesting fact about Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is that the novel came about as the result of a wager. She was eighteen, visiting her lover, Percy Bysshe Shelley, for the summer, and they were spending time with

Lord Byron. Byron proposed a bet to see who could write the scariest supernatural story. Her entry in this competition became the novel. In the preface to the 1831 edition, Shelley wrote that this story came from a daydream: “ I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life with an uneasy, half vital motion.” She wanted to “ frighten [her] reader as [she herself] had been frightened that night” (Pamintuan).

The story involves Victor Frankenstein’s desire to make a name for himself by bringing the dead back to life – or using his own ingenuity to circumvent the process by which life comes into existence, and leaves existence behind. While the desire to bring loved ones back from the grave, so that one might never need to grieve again, is a laudable one, the fact remains that life has been designed with a cycle of birth, youth, age, decay and death. Attempts to circumvent that cycle almost always end with silliness, if not tragedy. (If you don’t believe me, go to a high society party for the middle-aged, or for those slightly older. The thousands spent on plastic surgery and garments that people don’t quite fit into will be laughable. That’s the silly part. For the tragic part, consider May-October weddings like that between Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher.) In the case of this novel, Dr. Frankenstein ends up creating life from the parts of dead bodies, but his creature ends up hating him, because the creature is an object of disgust to all of the living – his first foray into a town makes him rue “ the treatment from the barbarous villagers” (Shelley). While Dr. Frankenstein was able to stitch body parts

together and animate them, and give them an intellectual consciousness, the end result looks like a walking corpse. The creature returns to demand a bride from his creator. The doctor's first response to his creature is, "Cursed be the day, abhorred devil, in which you first saw light!" (Shelley) - clearly, the doctor regrets his decision to make life. When the doctor refuses, the creature kills the doctor's own beloved. The doctor hurries to reanimate her, but she is disgusted at her reanimated self and ends up destroying herself. In a rage, the doctor ends up chasing the creature across the Arctic - at which point he runs into the ship whose captain ends up reporting all of these events.

Clearly, accepting the cycle of life which we have been given is central to finding a life of meaning. Dr. Frankenstein can't accept this, and his attempts to find a way around it consume him to the point of mental and physical exhaustion while he is at university. The results of his research also indicate the dangers of such an obsession - instead of becoming a wonder, the creature must hide in a barn to avoid frightening those around him and becoming prey to fear and hatred. Had Dr. Frankenstein been able to stay away from this topic of research, it is likely that his life would have been much happier.

The situation of *The Decameron* is similar to that of the writing of *Frankenstein*: several bored people (ten, in this case) are sitting around with nothing to do, and so stories become a form of entertainment. In this book, the characters have left the city of Florence for a remote villa for two weeks, to escape the plague. For ten days, each person will tell a story - for a total

of 100 stories. Each person is in charge of choosing the topic of stories for that day. No matter what the topic is, though, the theme that runs through the whole collection of stories is that a meaningful life comes when one takes advantages of all of the blessings that appear. Because life is uncertain, and is most likely to be shorter than one would like, one should enjoy it as much as possible. In the Second Day, Seventh Story, the narrator points out that “ a kissed mouth doesn’t lose its freshness, for like the moon it always renews itself” (Boccaccio). People who take advantage of the romantic opportunities afforded to them will be happier, and find more meaning, than those who do not. This does not necessarily mean that one must be promiscuous to find happiness; rather, it means that one should live life passionately - in monogamy, it is possible to keep freshness in a relationship by keeping romance involved in it. Also, enjoying the good life can give life meaning as well. In the introduction the Fourth Day, the narrator says that “ in the affairs of this world, poverty alone is without envy” (Boccaccio). In other words, material success can bring meaning and happiness to life - if done in moderation.

Much of literature attempts to speak to the ways to live a full and meaningful life. The specific ways that different people try to bring themselves meaning and significance will vary, depending on their own philosophies of life.

Throughout European history, such movements as the Age of Reason and the Romantic Era represented different schools of thought as to the way to find happiness and contentment in life. Boccaccio and Shelley are just two of the many writers who have taken on this idea as a theme - ironically, there

may be as many answers to the question of finding the meaning of life as there are people trying to answer it.

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