

Frankenstein: personification of the prometheus myth and science

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How does the subtitle “ The Modern Prometheus” assist Shelley in pointing out the underlying significance of her story?

Mary Shelley’s work Frankenstein is a symbolic representation of the doubts and fears she, and her contemporaries, shared regarding the advances of science in the nineteenth century (Britton, 2-3). In order for Shelley to fully convey her sentiment about the dangers of scientific aspiration, she employs the myth of Prometheus and uses it as a subtitle to Frankenstein. In doing this Shelley actively, yet subtly, encourages the reader to draw comparisons between Prometheus and Frankenstein, aiding them in fully coming to understand the implications of Frankenstein’s actions, and how he embodies Shelley’s warning concerning an over-emphasis on the value of science in society.

Located in both Roman and Greek mythology, Prometheus is attributed with the creation of man, and later for stealing fire from the heavens in order to provide man with warmth and the ability to cook food (Pontikis, 1-3).

Prometheus’ ambition leads him on a journey to better the lives of the men he has created and loves, but in doing so he defies Zeus’ commands and is consequently seriously punished for his actions by being chained to a rock. When examined in this context, Prometheus can be a fitting symbol for Victor Frankenstein.

Frankenstein’s ambition to bestow life onto an inanimate object became the sole driving force in his life. He was enticed by the belief that “ a new species will bless me as its creator and source” (Norton, 933) whilst ironically ignoring the real life relationships with those who loved him dearly. Like

Prometheus, this decision to defy the natural law of the world left Frankenstein a tormented and broken man, embodying Shelley's concern about the consequences of a deified approach to science. Frankenstein and Prometheus, although both seemingly acting in a benevolent fashion, were in fact offering a distorted blessing. Fire in Prometheus' case can be used for both good and evil, and correspondingly Frankenstein's ability to bestow life on inanimate objects leads to evil, which can be witnessed in the destructive deeds of the daemon, as well as his own selfish actions and cold treatment towards his creation.

The repercussions of Frankenstein and Prometheus' actions leave them both suffering. In the Prometheus myth, the protagonist is punished for his deeds by Zeus and the creation of Pandora is effected by Zeus as a means to punish both man and their creator Prometheus. Pandora is given a box from Zeus and instructed not to open it. Yet she is so overcome with curiosity that she too defies Zeus' commands and upon opening the box releases the evils of the world to torment mankind (Pontikis, 4). It is through this story that the term " Pandora's Box" came into existence. This is an interesting analogy when applied to Frankenstein's actions of animating his daemon. He too opens a " Pandora's Box" which bestows upon him consequences he is not prepared or equipped to deal with. This appears to be a strong underlying theme in Shelley's novel. She is concerned about the impetuous desire of human beings to attain omnipotent power.

This desire is still present in the world today; in fact one could argue it is present on an even grander scale since the inception of genetic engineering

and its branch sciences. This could be one reason why Shelley's novel still enjoys popularity today; it prompts a challenging question regarding human nature's desire to reach god-like status, and it presents our collective societal responsibility for the education of both the present and future generations about the dangers of such ambition. If we regard the downfall of Frankenstein as a warning, then it is clear that any attempt to create life outside of the natural governing laws of the world would be nothing more than a selfish action unhinged from moral and social obligations.

One further point which the subtitle *The Modern Prometheus* serves to highlight deals with the role of women in society. As mentioned, Prometheus is regarded as the creator of man in Roman and Greek mythology. He is not, however directly credited with the creation of women; this was an act instituted by Zeus by way of a punishment to Prometheus for his love of his creation (man) (Pontikis, 3-4). It is interesting to note that women were created for the purpose of punishment and not for joy or companionship in the ancient mythologies.

The myth of Prometheus depicts women in a negative fashion. Until the creation of the beautiful yet troublesome Pandora, there is no mortal female even present in the story. This is another interesting allusion of the Prometheus myth when contextualised to the story of Frankenstein. All of the women in the Frankenstein novel come to an untimely death: Frankenstein's mother dies prior to the animation of his daemon; Elizabeth is orphaned following the death of her mother in childbirth; Justine, the nurse of young William, is wrongfully convicted for his murder and executed; and Elizabeth

herself is eventually murdered just prior to consummating her marriage to Frankenstein on their wedding night (Norton, 905-1033).

Following Frankenstein's immediate rejection of his creation, it becomes apparent that the daemon is destined to be not only motherless, but partnerless as well. The ill-fatedness of female characters in the novel could likely have been deliberately implanted by Shelley as a means of commenting on the role of women in society at the time, but furthermore, it could have been a direct representation of the lack of a strong female role model in her own life and the sense of abandonment it evoked (Literary Encyclopedia, 3). The ideology of the second suggestion is present in the dream Frankenstein has following the creation of his monster. He describes an encounter with Elizabeth where whilst he is kissing her she transforms into the corpse of his dead mother (Norton, 935) These references to women, and the lack of any sound male-female relationships is an important aspect of Shelley's story.

Mary Shelley presents a compelling portrayal of Victor Frankenstein as a modern day Prometheus. His ambitions and actions may be less noble than those of Prometheus, yet the results of their attempts to usurp the natural order of the world by animating "lifeless clay" (Norton, 933) provokes similar results. Frankenstein personifies the self-glorification so characteristic of today's society, a trait he obviously represented in Shelley's society as well.