

# Reflection of the essence of the romantic quest in frankenstein

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Victor Frankenstein, like many Romantics, relies upon his unusual capacity for sensitivity and creativity to aid him in his ambitions. In contrast to Robert Walton, who ventures to the North Pole to find “ beauty and delight” (Shelley 15) amidst desolation, Victor desires to create a better race as a gift to mankind. Although he and Walton appear, at first glance, to be undertaking entirely different quests, the underlying motive is the same: both men long for spiritual exaltation (the elevation of their minds and souls above those of other men).

The characters of Walton and Frankenstein are shaped by Romantic idealism, as manifested in their pursuit of discovery through scientific investigation and adventure. The essential difference between the two men lies in the way in which they attempt to accomplish their respective goals. Curious and determined, Walton sets out to “ tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man” in an effort to live up to his Romantic ideals. While he describes his motivations as “ sufficient to conquer all fear of danger or death” (16), Shelley portrays Walton as a compassionate character from the very beginning. Despite his deep investment in his voyage, his concern for family and friends persists. This seems to mirror the Romantic position presented in William Wordsworth’s “ Tintern Abbey,” which is addressed to the poet’s “ dear, dear sister” (Wordsworth 110). Walton similarly maintains from the novel’s outset that his “ first task is to assure my dear sister of my welfare” (Shelley 15). His regard for his sister mirrors his vigilant concern for the well-being of his crew.

Like Walton, Victor is obsessed with the idea of the undiscovered. In narrating his first attempts at scientific endeavor, Victor exclaims, “ no one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onward like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success” (52). It is obvious that both Walton and Victor are driven by an uncommonly avid passion for discovery. Walton, however, differs from Victor in his capacity for compassion and love. This is illustrated by Victor’s isolation from society and his callous treatment of the monster upon its completion.

Like Walton, whose fond memories of youth make up the greater part of his first letters, Victor also enjoyed an idyllic childhood. Victor remarks, “ no human could have passed a happier childhood than myself. My parents were possessed by the very spirit of kindness and indulgence” (37). However, a strange transformation seems to take place in Victor upon his departure for university. Melancholy seizes him as he, “ who had ever been surrounded by amiable companions . . . now [found himself] alone” (44). It is at this moment that Victor begins to descend into the isolation that will devastate him by novel’s end.

During this initial seclusion, Victor occasionally reflects upon his self-imposed solitude. He remarks that he has failed to notice “ a most beautiful season” because his “ eyes were insensible to the charms of nature”; he also acknowledges that “ the same feelings which made me neglect the scenes around me caused me also to forget those friends who were so many miles absent, and whom I had not seen for so long a time” (53). Although Victor promises his family that they will remain first in his thoughts, he becomes

obsessed with his unnatural pursuit. This self-absorption is the cause of Victor's eventual downfall at the monster's hands.

Many of the more hateful aspects of Victor's character become apparent in his reaction to the creature. He responds with horror the instant the monster opens his "dull yellow eye": "now... the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart." While one may assume that his loathing is due to the hideousness of the "wretch" (56), his terror has quite a different source. The monster is a reflection of Victor, his uncanny double; when the monster opens his eyes Victor is appalled to see his own soul reflected there.

Victor's incestuous dream, in which the figure of Elizabeth turns into his mother's corpse, seems to represent his feelings of guilt and betrayal. By leaving home, Victor had separated himself from all feminine influences, instead immersing himself in the masculine world of scientific endeavor. Thus, it seems that the awakening of the monster represents the violent return of his repressed sexual desires: he has forsaken marriage and fatherhood to "give birth" to a monster of his own (exclusively male) creation. Since his mother's dying wish was his marriage with Elizabeth, it is as though the marriage is to be to his mother as well. The repressed sexual desire is in fact directed toward both women.

In creating the monster, Victor ostensibly hoped to create a finer human race. His real impetus, however, can be seen to be his own narcissism. Victor maintains that "a new species would bless me as its creator and source;

many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me" (52). With these words, it seems that Victor desires to be the object of the monster's eternal worship (as God is to "normal man"). Victor abandons himself to the unnatural, transgressive wish to "renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption" (53). Whether as a mother/God to his creation or as a passionate son to his mother, Victor desires to be desired.

In the beginning of the novel, Shelley portrays Victor as a victim of mysterious circumstances. The reader's first encounter with him is through Walton, who falls instantly in love with the noble victim: he rhapsodizes that he has "found a man who, before his spirit had been broken by misery, I should have been happy to have possessed as the brother of my heart" (25-6). This sympathetic portrayal of Victor continues until the creation scene, after which the novel will be given over to Victor's suffering and to the deep flaws in his own character that made that suffering possible. Desperately seeking love and affection (as does a newborn baby), the creature moves to embrace Victor "while a grin wrinkled his cheeks" (57). Victor spurns those advances, describing only his "horror" at the monster's physical appearance.

For Victor, this is the beginning of the end: his decision to abandon the creature is the catalyst for all the evil and misfortune that follow. Though it he who brings the creature to life, his first act is to desert it and deny all responsibility for its happiness and well-being. Victor longed to transcend death, create a superior human race, and thereby become a god; instead, his megalomania (the mad, self-obsessed desire for absolute power) results

in the destruction of everyone he loves. Victor finally recognizes his guilt, exclaiming “ William, Justine, and Henry they all died by my hands” (176). By then, of course, it is too late: his failure to warn his loved ones about the creature and its murderous intentions indicates Victor’s inability to accept responsibility for his actions.

Shelley uses the story of Walton’s quest as a frame for the story of Victor Frankenstein. While Victor praises his family and, in fact, loves them dearly, he allows his yearning for personal aggrandizement to overshadow his emotional ties. Robert Walton, however, preserves himself against this, and it is evident in his letters to his sister that she remains in his thoughts.

Walton’s character, while compassionate and accommodating, is also quite complex. This is evidenced by his reaction to Victor’s story. In his second letter to Margaret, Walton writes that he truly desires a friend, “ the absence of the object of which I now feel as a most severe evil” (18). Shelley here foreshadows one of the causes of Victor’s downfall: Walton wants a friend who would have “ affection enough for me to endeavor to regulate my mind” (19). Walton feels a deep need to protect himself against the “ evil” that could befall him in the blind pursuit of his quest. By contrast, Victor “ paid no visit to Geneva, but was engaged, heart and soul, in the pursuit of some discoveries” (49) during his first two years at university.

The stories of Walton and Victor, as has already been noted, have a great many similarities. Walton’s expedition to the North Pole and Victor’s scientific accomplishments are both products of Romantic idealism. It is

important to note that Walton's quest, too, has scientific implications. He states that he " may discover the wondrous power which attracts the needle; and may regulate a thousand celestial observations" (15).

Walton and Victor's preoccupation with the masculine realm of scientific endeavor indicates their estrangement from domestic space and social obligations, which is characterized as feminine (since it is associated with Walton's sister and Elizabeth). While Walton retains his connections (however tenuous) with this feminine sphere, Victor utterly deprives himself of their modulating influence. This essential difference between the two men is borne out by their reactions to the sailors' request to abandon the expedition and return to England. Victor exhorts the men to continue, despite the threat of certain death; Walton (although furious at their " cowardice") consents to turn the ship about. This can be connected with the promise made by Walton in his very first letter: " I shall do nothing rashly; you know me sufficiently to confide in my prudence and considerateness when the safety of others is committed to my care" (20); his compassion is enough to overcome his narcissistic desire for personal glory. Even Victor's desire to impart life to another creature can be read as a denial of the feminine and of nature, in that the giving of life (through childbirth) is an exclusively female prerogative.

Both Walton and Victor are unsuccessful in their quests. The primary difference between the two men lies in the nature of their failures. Victor's ruin is complete because his estrangement from the feminine world of love and family is complete; Walton's is only partial because his detachment is

partial. Wollstonecraft Shelley thus suggests that it is only through the humanizing influence of femininity that mankind can be redeemed.