

The role of electricity in mary shelley's frankenstein



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Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* is a nineteenth century gothic novel that demonstrates the discovery of the nature of electricity. In the novel, electricity plays a major role in creating the life of the monster. Shelley introduces science, especially electricity as an ethical theme and shows it through the life and demise of Victor Frankenstein and his creature. The creation of the monster does lead to Victor's demise and Shelley parallels the idea to scientific discovery and the future. With knowledge, comes great power and destruction and Shelley views science as a powerful entity but also recognizes the dangers of it, if uncontrolled.

Electricity is made up of negative and positive forces pulling against one another and this duality can be applied to all aspects in *Frankenstein*, including the doubling of characters, good versus evil and the responsibility that Victor does not take toward the monster. Victor creates life from his own greed and in the end, the very being that he gives life to haunts him and tries to take away Victor's life as well. Victor first learns about electricity when he is fifteen, living near Belrive, Switzerland.

He witnesses " a most violent and terrible thunder-storm...watching its progress with curiosity and delight" (Shelley 69). As Victor is watching the storm, he sees a beautiful, old oak tree be destroyed by the " stream of fire" (Shelley 69). When he sees the damage to the tree that the lightning creates, Victor asks his father about the nature and origin of thunder and lightning. His father educated Victor in the " new science" by explaining to him the various effects of this power called electricity and constructs a small electrical machine to exhibit a few experiments.

After this experience with electricity, Victor becomes intrigued by it and while studying at the University of Ingolstadt, comes up with an idea to “renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption” (Shelley 82). He becomes obsessed with the idea of bringing a human form back to life by means of science and is not being very rational about it. He feels uncontrollably compelled to create animation in the lifeless body and he does what he has to do to practice the science.

He can see the devastation that the monster will create in the future and how dangerous it is, but the actuality of creating the creature is illuminating to him so he does it anyway. In the first part of the lightning scene, Victor is amazed by the power of the lightning to destroy. He explains how intrigued he was by the lightning when he says “the catastrophe of this tree excited my extreme astonishment” (Shelley 70). Just as science creates dual reactions, lightning holds the same power of magnetism that can create two separate charges. It creates uncontrolled destruction, as Victor did with the monster. Once lightning hits, it cannot be controlled and in this case, once the monster has been created, Victor cannot control it either.

Shelley is saying here that knowledge is power, but with that knowledge brings destruction. Lightning may be illuminating at times, but it can destroy beautiful things and be more of a negative force than a positive one. She is relating this scene to the Industrial Revolution with the destruction of nature and increased industrialization with the electrical machine Victor's father uses to show him the experiments. After Victor goes to university, he begins his studies on the structure of the human frame. He realizes that “to

examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death" (Shelley 79).

He becomes interested in the science of anatomy and examines and analysis the decaying of the human body. After a long period of study, Victor succeeds " in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter" (Shelley 80). It is so gratifying to him that he experienced this discovery that it gives him the idea of creating a life himself. Victor does however recognize the power he holds before him and does consider the dangers ahead.

He admits " when I found so astonishing a power placed within my hands, I hesitated a long time concerning the manner in which I should employ it" (Shelley 81). Science to him at this point, is an open book and he thinks he can go anywhere with it. Science gives him the opportunity to pursue his dreams of creating the " spark of life" in a lifeless being and thinks electricity can help him do it. In the scene when Victor is finally creating his monster, Shelley is making a point that when practicing science, people need reason, logic and method, but also to have an emotional component to it as well.

When Victor is actually bringing the monster to life, he is so emotionally involved that he does not think about the destruction he is about to create. He just wants to be the one to animate dead life and that is all he can think about. When the monster does come to life, Shelley does not actually describe in detail how it happens. This is a way of making the scene more believable and to prove that science is questionable and has its limits. It

leads a reader to question the mystery of science and to use imagination to figure out what the limits are.

Shelley uses the duality of Frankenstein and his monster against the duality of electrical forces. She represents Victor and the monster to be the good and evil in one being. She creates these types of characters as a way of questioning whether or not we are as human as we think we are. After Victor creates the monster, he hides from his responsibility of the creature. He does not admit to creating such a thing and does not keep his friends from being murdered because of it. He also shows a lack of control over himself to create the being.

The monster, however, shows moments of intellect and rationality, especially when he wants to make friends or have Victor create a partner for him. She also creates the similarity to focus on what is on the inside of a person, not just on the outside. Shelley shows the monster to be somewhat caring and logical when he is discovering life for the first time. Even though he is hideous in Victor's eyes, some might say that Victor is the hideous one for shunning the monster and not taking responsibility over his creation. Also, the doubling of characters can also show how history repeats itself and that people are condemned to repeat the past.

There is also a doubling of characters through Victor and the monster in the place of their fathers. Victor's father did not like him studying nonsense science, like philosophy and called it " sad trash" (Shelley 68). Victor tries to blame his father for being dismissive and not knowing and understanding him as a child, even though he did have a pretty good childhood. He relates

so much to blaming his parents for not taking responsibility for him and yet he does not take responsibility of the monster when the creature is destroying lives.

He blames his father for being neglectful, yet he neglects the monster when he just wants someone to love that can also love him back. This demonstrates how Victor acts as a father and creator himself. He is doing the same thing that his father did by neglecting the creature and showing that the past does repeat itself. This creates a mutual hatred between the two main characters in the novel. By diametrically opposing these characters Shelley creates a resemblance of the two sides of one being and demonstrates just how similar the human and non-human can be.

Shelley's use of science in the Gothic novel relates to the scientific discoveries of the Medieval and Romantic Periods. Her novel is a product of the science that was being researched during that time, which is electricity. This novel shows that Shelley knew what she was talking about back in 1818 and that anything, if left uncontrolled can be dangerous and disastrous. Shelley compares the creation of the monster to the creation of machines during the Industrial Revolution as well. People wanted to escape reality and live in a fantasy world.

Shelley created that in Frankenstein with the science of electricity to evoke the reality of the future into peoples' minds. The novel evokes a fear of over-ambiguous, misguided, dangerous science and how there are limits to any science that is practiced and proven. Scientific discoveries may not be all a step in the right direction. Shelley introduces science as an ethical theme

and that it challenges the reality of the world. She tries to show that electricity along with any science can be very illuminating but very destructive as well.