

The sublime and science in frankenstein by mary shelley

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



For many, it is hard to think of the world of science and the art of literature working in tandem. In the 1800s, the discipline of natural philosophy rapidly changed due to the Enlightenment, moving toward formal sciences.

Romanticism served as a backlash to the extreme rationalization displayed in the Enlightenment, which focused on universal betterment, imagination, and the beauty found in the natural world. Mary Shelley wrote her famous novel, *Frankenstein*, which blends Enlightenment characteristics of scientific discovery with the Romantic aesthetic of the sublime. Throughout the novel, Shelley employs the sublime, effectively addressing the anxieties and uncertainty surrounding scientific progress in nineteenth-century Europe.

The Enlightenment, a time of scientific discovery deeply rooted in reason and rationality, boasted many experiments and theories regarding life. One experiment in particular is often discussed when analyzing Shelley's work: Luigi Galvani's experiment in which he "claimed he could reanimate dead frogs by injecting them with what he called 'animal electricity,' which he managed to do when his dead specimens were affixed with metal pins connected to plates rubbed together to create an electrical charge" (Oakes 62). The characteristics of this experiment parallel those of Victor Frankenstein's. The method, which is never fully disclosed, is described by Victor as "[infusing] a spark of being into the lifeless thing," which can be read as the use of electric current, similar to Galvani's experiment (Shelley 45). By echoing back to an earlier Enlightenment experiment, Shelley creates a tale of the destruction that is plausible, though horrific to envision, given Galvani's experiment of reanimation (Oakes 62). Electrical imagery is also evoked early on in the novel, drawing attention to both the scientific

aspect of an electrical storm as well as its sublime beauty. As a boy, Victor witnesses “ a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak...and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump...[He] never beheld something so utterly destroyed” (Shelley 30) This sublime scene foreshadows the destructive outcome of Victor’s own experiment: once he emerges from his undertaking, he realizes just how destructive his creation is. This moment, while easily overlooked, is pivotal in Frankenstein’s scientific career; it drives his fascination with the sciences. However, Victor’s desire to create life is based on the outdated principles of Alchemy written by Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Magnus, despite the advice from his professor at Ingolstadt to pursue credible fields of science (28-29, 35). Frankenstein aspires to achieve greatness through scientific advancement, but instead he falls victim to his pursuits, which drives him into isolation. When reflecting on Frankenstein’s endeavors, Montag states, “[he] will not achieve the freedom [he] dreamed of but merely a new kind of servitude,” which is evident when Frankenstein locks himself away, a slave to his experiment (391). Instead of bringing Victor into a scientific community, his pursuits become so demanding that he locks himself away, and he is “ irrevocably divided from his family and friends” (391). The use of the sublime can be seen when analyzing the physical effects that Frankenstein’s solitude has on his wellbeing. Rather than continuing his studies and maintaining both his physical and mental health, he describes himself, stating, “ I appeared rather like one doomed by slavery to toil in the mines...Every night I was oppressed by a slow fever, and I became nervous to a most painful degree; the fall of a leaf startled me, and

I shunned my fellow-creatures as if I had been guilty of a crime," which indicates that even Frankenstein is aware of the irrationality of his actions (Shelley 44).

Along with echoing back to Enlightenment experiments and Victor's own personal toils, the sublime is evoked to describe the fateful scene when the creature is given life. The sublime elements used further the notion that scientific discovery is a source of uncertainty: It was a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me...It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open.

(Shelley 45) The sublime elements of this quote can be seen in the described setting. The late hour, along with the dreary weather, creates a scene intended to fill the reader with dread and unease. By creating such a sublime setting, Shelley is drawing attention to the fact that Frankenstein does not fully understand what will come of his creation. Furthermore, the awakening of Frankenstein's creation is beyond rationalization; the idea that life can be given to a being that is essentially multiple corpses sewn together is beyond human comprehension, therefore evoking the sublime. The possibilities are both intriguing and horrifying, much like the description of the scene. This description "commit[s] aesthetic transgressions using scientific creative methods," combining both the sciences and the humanities in order to

express the anxieties associated with intellectual progress, including disrupting natural lifecycles while attempting to play God (Padley 198).

Furthermore, the sublime and science gone awry can be used to dismantle the notion that scientific advancement will always be beneficial for human progress. In his article, Warren Montag argues, "Frankenstein thus rejects one of the most fundamental myths of the Enlightenment, the notion that scientific...progress will continually improve the condition of humankind" (391). When Victor has the realization that his creation could potentially reproduce if he were to create a female counterpart for the creature, he envisions the demise of the human race at the hands of his creation. In a moment of panic, he discerns, "the first results of those sympathies which the daemon would thirst for would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. Had I a right...to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations?" (Shelley 151). The description of a new race of horrific creatures populating the planet for an indefinite amount of time is sublime in that it is both irrational to believe that it is within the realm of possibilities and discomfoting to imagine the outcome of such a situation. This premonition is also a backlash against scientific progress because advancement in Victor's scientific endeavors would not aid human progress, but rather hinder the progression of the human race due to competition with unimaginable, superior beings.

In Frankenstein, Shelley also argues against the need for science to validate the human experience. Shelley's novel, written mere decades after the

conclusion of the Enlightenment, grapples with vitalism and materialism, two concepts regarding human animation. Vitalism is described as “ the doctrine that claimed a ‘ life principle’ is present in all living things over and above the metabolic functions,” whereas materialism claims that life is simply derived from physical and earthly matter, nothing more (Oakes 59). Victor attempts to play God in Frankenstein, removing the spiritual element from creation, thus discrediting vitalism. Instead, “ he reduces true creation to materialistic invention, and he remains a finite materialist in a state of denial, inventing by assembling preexisting materials into a hideous frame fashioned after his own filthy image,...that he is unprepared to accept, nurture, or redeem,” which shows that while Victor is willing to play God, he cannot transcend the physical world to attain something more divine (Hogsette 534). Likewise, the inability to comprehend a future of artificial-making plays into the anxieties surrounding scientific progress, particularly those revolving around the Industrial Revolution.

Furthermore, this argument highlights the issues that arise when one is not willing to take responsibility for the negative outcomes of their scientific experiments, an underlying anxiety throughout the text. Victor, rather than taking on the parental role of a father to his creation, shuts in fear of what he has created. He falls extremely ill, and “ the form of the monster on whom [he] had bestowed existence was forever before [his] eyes, and [he] raved incessantly concerning him,” evoking sublime imagery of the scientist’s tortured mind (Shelley 49). His inability to come to terms with what he has created, and the impact it will have on his future, as well as on

the future of his family, parallels the fears associated with “ the creation of monsters by the industrial order” that would come about through scientific progress (Montag 395). Scientific advancement, when not properly conducted or conducted with little regard for anything other than personal gain, can be quite harmful to the human race.

In his article, “ The Devaluing of Life in Shelley’s Frankenstein,” Lars Lunsford addresses the anxieties of being ostracized from society when one undertakes a scientific endeavor: Perhaps if Victor had valued the life he created—and helped the monster at this critical moment—he would have prevented most (if not all) of the devastation that follows. But he fears what people will think of him for creating a monstrosity and abandons his creation at the moment it enters the world, thus preserving his reputation but placing his family (and the world) at risk. (175) Victor Frankenstein does place his family and society at risk when he abandons his creation. Three family members, a family friend, and Victor’s closest and only friend lose their lives because his desire to remain in good societal standing is more valuable to him than the lives of those around him (175). Specifically regarding the execution of Justine, he justifies his silence by claiming “ a thousand times rather would I have confessed myself guilty of the crime ascribed to Justine; [but] such a declaration would have been considered as the ravings of a madman,” showing that Victor is not willing to lose his reputation in claiming responsibility for William’s death and in saving Justine’s life (Shelley 68). For Victor, the idea of being ostracized from society, which would put him in the same position as his creation, is horrifying and incomprehensible, leading

him to act selfishly. The devaluation of human life, another anxiety attributed to scientific process, is a persistent theme in Shelley's novel. Scientific progress, and the unimaginable future it presents, increases anxieties about "reducing the number of workers necessary to the production process [that] added to what was already a crisis of unemployment" (Montag 387).

Throughout the novel, Frankenstein's creation serves as a representation of the social classes harmed the most due to scientific progress (i. e., the lower class and the working class). Montag argues that, "technology and science... are present only in their effects; their truth becomes visible only in the face of their hideous progeny and is written in the tragic lives of those who serve them," with the truth being that consideration for human life becomes secondary to scientific progress (392). Once the value of human life is realized, the unthinkable has already occurred, and scientific progress becomes a societal detriment. Desire for scientific advancement comes to halt in the Arctic, the final sublime setting of Shelley's novel. Walton, whose letters both open and close the novel, is an explorer seeking to reach the North Pole, until he learns of the devastation that has befallen Frankenstein as a result of his restless pursuit of the sciences. Before Frankenstein's death, Walton's attitude is similar to Victor's regarding restless pursuit and his desire for reputation. In a letter to his sister he explains, "I had rather die than return shamefully - my purpose unfulfilled," which echoes back to Victor's aspirations of glory and esteemed reputation (Shelley 193). It is only once Frankenstein concludes his tale and passes away that Walton realizes

his ventures are needlessly endangering the lives of his crew; he resolves, " I am returning to England. I have lost my hopes of utility and glory...I cannot lead them unwillingly to danger" (194). Such a conclusion indicates that while Frankenstein was initially unable to recognize the dangers of scientific progress and the value of human life, his tale instilled in Walton an understanding Victor lacked. Additionally, Walton makes the decision to turn away from the incomprehensible landscape of the North Pole and return to his homeland, thus indicating Walton's willingness to turn away from scientific progress that is both dangerous to his crew and not necessarily beneficial to mankind. In heading back to England, Walton both turns away from science as well as leads the reader away from the sublime, back toward a more comprehensible way of life.

Throughout the novel Frankenstein, the sublime is used as a method of highlighting the uncertainty surrounding unfounded scientific progress. While the novel was written two centuries ago, the message of the novel remains timeless, and has throughout history. While much scientific progress has greatly benefited human life, such as advancements in the healthcare fields and developing practices that reduce toxins emitted into the environment, other endeavors have done more harm than good, particularly those causing mass destruction and the loss of countless lives. When striving to make an impact in the sciences, one must take the time to consider the implications, as well as whether their intentions are for the betterment of mankind, or for personal fame.

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