The context of the history in frankenstein

Literature, Russian Literature

‘ Art is unimaginable without a matrix of culture… it is inconceivable without a history’ .

Stephen Cox’s comment articulates the poststructuralist view that the meanings of a text always derive from its context. Certainly, much of Mary Shelley’s historical context is evident in her novel, Frankenstein. Coming after the Religious Reformation, the Industrial Revolution and the commencement of the Age of Enlightenment and even feminism, the society in which Shelley lived and wrote was characterised by change and questioning, and, like many of her contemporaries, Shelley interrogates the dynamics of society in terms of religion, science, prejudices (racial and physical), sexuality and gender. These interrogations are evident in many aspects of the novel; its plot concerning the concept of man-made life; its hubristic protagonist who meddles with Nature and Science and the novel’s demonstration of the subsequent effects of these two on society and their lessons for society. Arguably, though, it is through the Creature that Shelley offers her readers the most powerful perspective on the injustices and issues within society. As Judith Halberstam suggests, the Creature can be seen to represent Mary Shelley herself, class struggle, the product of industrialisation, a representation of the proletariat, all social struggle, a symbol of the French Revolution, technology, the danger of science without conscience and the autonomous machine. The Creature therefore, usefully highlights contemporary issues, thus displaying how the historical context in which Frankenstein was written manifests itself in the novel.

The first major context that shapes Frankenstein is religion. Following the rise of Protestantism and the Age of Enlightenment, the nineteenth century

bore witness to great changes in, and attitudes towards, religion. Among the most important forces behind these changes was the French Revolution; a momentous event that had allowed the prospect of religious and social freedom following The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. The early nineteenth century, then, was a time in which people searched for philosophical answers outside of religious institutions and questioned orthodox dogma. This questioning is evident in Frankenstein in its integral theme of challenging the role of God as the sole Creator that underpins Frankenstein's hubristic quest to discover the ability for man-made procreation. Shelley, however, appears deeply critical of this. Addressing Frankenstein, the Creature states: ' I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed' . These allusions to Adam, Genesis and the Fall present Frankenstein as a spiteful, irrational creator, strongly suggesting Shelley's view of the harmful nature of the type of challenge to the accepted order of life and the role of God as the sole Creator that Frankenstein embodies.

Indeed, this is further supported by the fact that the preface to the 1818 edition begins with a quotation from Paradise Lost: ' Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay/ To mould me man? Did I solicit thee/ From darkness to promote me?— ' Using this as the preliminary idea of the novel suggests Shelley's awareness of and engagement with philosophical discourses that were prevalent during the Age of Enlightenment, thus explaining why Shelley might wish to explore the idea that man and not solely God may hold the ability of creating life. At the same time, Shelley seems to use the Creature as a tool to show this revolutionary audience – an audience questioning the

previously unchallenged church doctrine – the tragic effects of confronting the familial acceptance of beliefs, including the role of God, too far in possible favour of the development of science that ultimately causes destruction in society. In fact, it seems plausible that here Shelley is directly opposing the challenges of the conformist Church; the ultimate tragedy and destruction that this creation of ‘ unnatural stimulus’ results in points to Shelley’s criticisms of a society that questions the natural order of life. Here, again, she uses the Creature as a lens through which the reader can look which displays her criticisms; through Frankenstein she shows that human society is, if anything, more monstrous than unnaturally created life because it is human society – God-created civilisation – that turns the Creature into a vicious monster.

Closely linked to all this is Shelley’s critique of science and her fears of its destructive results following its development. Such concerns were common in the period, following the development of Erasmus Darwin’s theories as well as The French Revolution. Norton Garfinkle notes that ‘ when The French Revolution raised the spectre of an anarchistic society founded upon an atheistic science, religious opinion came to fear the social implications of unrestrained scientific speculation.’ This fear is evident in the novel’s overall presentation of the tragedy of a scientist and his scientific project. But it can also be seen in particular details. For example, contemporary scientists such as Humphry Davy, Luigi Galvani and Adam Walker explored attempts to control or change the universe through human interference- a practice that Shelley describes the inherent dangers of through this novel. Also, as Tim Marshall notes, demand for cadavers increased as medicine advanced.

Interestingly, Marshall mentions the ‘ Patent’ Coffin registered in 1817 just before the publication of Frankenstein. This was advertised as an easy access into the afterlife, while explicitly hinting at the lucrative market of grave robbing . And, as Anne Mellor points out, Frankenstein’s introduction to chemical physiology at the University of Ingolstadt is based on Davy’s famous lecture on an introduction to chemistry . All this suggests Shelley’s awareness of new branches of science and scientific practices, thus supporting the view that she explores these issues and considers their possible outcomes in Frankenstein.

Once more, though, Shelley appears critical of contemporaneous ideas and practices. Notably, Shelley utilises the dramatically ironic phrase ‘ a godlike science’ to describe Frankenstein’s feelings towards his endeavours during the Creature’s creation, further accentuating the atrocity of this kind of scientific project. Indeed, most readers would immediately notice the morbid nature of such an undertaking. For Frankenstein, though, it is already too late; he is so engrossed in such exciting, innovative ideas he cannot appreciate that he has crossed acceptable and moral boundaries. Possibly, for Shelley, this mirrors the potential fate of her own society that continues to develop science and, to some degree, discredit religion. More certainly, however, through the microcosm of Frankenstein’s atrocious project, Shelley depicts the potentially destructive nature of her society that seeks damagingly hubristic manipulations of the physical universe. As alluded to in the secondary title of The Modern Prometheus, Shelley signifies that Frankenstein (and the macrocosm of her society) must be punished for

stealing ‘ the light of reason’, or manipulative science, from the gods and giving it to the world.

Two other inter-related key contexts for, and illustrated in, Frankenstein are those of prejudices – racial and physical – and ignorance, most clearly revealed in the rejection of the Creature which in turn displays Shelley’s criticisms of both. Notably, when Shelley wrote the novel, the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act had yet to be passed and feelings of white supremacy were rife. Moreover, as Britain looked to expand her empire, competing with other powers, there was a greater feeling of racial superiority, and indeed new interpretations of Darwin’s theories of natural selection; ‘ eugenicists’ argued that handicapped people would diminish racial and national competitiveness and believed they could improve this limitation through selective breeding. Increasingly, disabled people were sterilised or kept in institutions permanently. These attitudes are manifested in Frankenstein through the intolerant attitudes towards the Creature and his rejection, reflecting prevailing attitudes towards foreigners as well as current attitudes towards the disfigured or physically handicapped because of their appearance and/or origin. Through the Creature’s mistreatment and rejection, Shelley plays on audience sympathy for the Creature and uses him to magnify the injustices of prejudice in her and her readers’ social context through the perspective of the persecuted. This is exemplified when the Creature says: ‘ I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am’ .

As the narrative in this section is presented by the Creature and the events are seen through the Creature’s eyes, the reader is made able to appreciate

his very ‘ human’ and compassionate feelings that make him far less of an outsider than his superficial appearance and the knowledge of his unnatural origin initially suggest. Thus, his pronouncement of himself as a ‘ monster’ allows the reader to see that the humans who are rejecting him are indeed the monstrous party. Frankenstein does not hear the plight of the Creature because of his own selfish feelings of superiority and intolerance to things ‘ queer’ to him. The reader, however, does hear and appreciate this through the sympathies allowed by the journey of the Creature’s narrative, reinforcing the idea of nineteenth century society’s own xenophobia. Here, the Creature’s purpose is to teach the contemporary reader as the Creature learns himself. Feasibly, Shelley is endeavouring to show her audience that humanity – through selfishness and greed – is unenlightened in terms of ideas of equality. After studying through reading various books from the De Lacy home, the monster questions: ‘ was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous and magnificent, yet so vicious and base?’ This leaves a resonating questioning of ideology that would have been directly relevant and poignant within Shelley’s immediate society.

If English society in the early nineteenth century was characterised by racial and physical prejudices and ignorance, then it was also characterised by ignorance towards sexuality and certain taboos, as Michel Foucault highlights in his ‘ repression hypothesis’. The topic of sexuality, Foucault argues, has been notoriously taboo in society and he alerts us to the fact that ‘ we have found it difficult to speak on the subject [of sex] without striking a different pose: we are conscious of defying established power’ . In light of this, the implied homosexuality of Frankenstein directly defies

conventions of the time in that Shelley presents sexual repression in her novel. When considering possible intentions of Frankenstein's efforts to produce life himself, it can be argued that these may have been centred around homosexual fantasies. Halberstam suggests that the reclusive nature of Frankenstein's endeavours to create life followed by his prevention of the Creature to mate depicts the sexual nature of his pursuits and the ' homoerotic tension which underlies the incestuous bond'. She then proposes that Frankenstein's plans to create ' a being like [his]self' ' hints at both masturbatory and homosexual desires' . Indeed, Frankenstein feels ' delight and rapture' when he is creating his ' man'. With this reading, Frankenstein's creation of his own sexual partner could be seen as Frankenstein's desire to explore his sexuality that is repressed and unacknowledged in open society. It could be argued here, then, that Shelley is engaging, albeit in a veiled manner, with a sexual taboo of her society. At the same time, however, Shelley is feasibly criticising such sexual desires and projects, warning the reader that the results of such a curious individual – if not society – who challenges the natural order of creating life and natural sexual practices are the unleashing of a monster into the world.

Indeed, the consequences of the unleashing of such a monster do not simply affect the individual. As Anne Mellor notes, Frankenstein's relationship with his monster portrays an implicit desire to produce a race of men in a world without the female species. As aforementioned, Shelley uses this implied desire of man- not an explicitly and widely discussed desire, but a possible result of the progress of applied science and increased freedom of thought in the Age of Enlightenment nevertheless – to illustrate how a world without

women would end in destruction and misery, and that too much freedom allowing the development of new ideas (such as the exploration of sexuality and human reproduction) could result in an uncontrollable society.

The final significant historical context feeding into and shaping Frankenstein is gender norms and the role of women. Throughout, there is an evident theme of passivity of women in the novel. All female characters seem to serve little significant purpose other than to be used and victimised. Frankenstein views Elizabeth as submissive and objectifies her by saying: “ I looked upon Elizabeth as mine – mine to protect, love and cherish. All praises bestowed on her I received as made to a possession of my own” – and yet he still fails to protect her. Similarly, Justine is presented as character who articulates her own passivity and subservience, stating: “ God knows how entirely I am innocent. But I do not pretend that my protestations should acquit me; I rest my innocence on a plain and simple explanation of the facts”. And, ultimately, she is merely another female victim and makes no fight for her justice. She serves little purpose other than to be framed. Moreover, in the 1831 preface, Shelley describes how she herself sat silently in on the conversations of her husband and Lord Byron. On the surface, these aspects reflect the prevailing attitude towards women during this period. However, this was also a time during which traditional views of women’s roles in patriarchal culture were beginning to be challenged, most notably in the writings of Shelley’s own mother, Mary Wollstonecraft and her Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), which expands on the plight of women. This appears to have left resonating questions about the roles of the sexes in Shelley’s mind, leading to her exploration of women’s roles,

particularly in procreation, in Frankenstein. In her novel, it seems Shelley suggests that the utter passivity of women, including in terms of procreation, leads to tragedy and destruction within families and society. When a man like Frankenstein undertakes the female role of reproducer of the species, not only does he behave aberrantly but he also produces an aberration.

At the same time, it is plausible that this male-centric novel proposes Shelley’s resentment of the biological roles of the sexes rather than her submission to the superiority of men. Ellen Moers describes Frankenstein as a female “ birth myth” suggesting Shelley’s ambivalence about maternity . That is, this plot that revolves around man’s intervention in procreation bespeaks a possible resentment for the fact that women are required to give birth and a woman’s responsibility to foster a child in her womb and guarantee its well-being. Indeed, Shelley’s mother had died as a result of childbirth, as well as her losing her own babies through miscarriages. The Creature itself may also represent a feminine role, Shelley’s tool to satirise misogyny. Indeed, William Duff wrote that women are ‘ monsters, not quite human, not quite animal’. He describes Mary Wollstonecraft as the ‘ hyena in petticoats’ because she surpassed the ‘ natural and proper bounds for a woman’ in her announcement of the rights of women. Once more, the Creature symbolises elements of socio-historical context, including misogyny, and is used by Shelley to subtly denounce these insolences. Thus, it appears that on the subject of women at least, while Frankenstein does reflect contemporary views of women, it is these views about which Shelley is the most ambivalent.

From all the above, then, we can see that Shelley’s use of the Creature as a window for the reader to observe the harmful effects of contemporary ideas and social practices offers one of the most powerful ways in which the novel’s historical context is manifested. For, it is through the Creature that Shelley refers to and criticises prevalent discourses and prevailing attitudes of her time, including those of and relating to religion, science, prejudices (racial and physical), sexuality and gender. And, it is through this in turn that Frankenstein proves and exemplifies the poststructuralist view that ‘ texts… are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place and society’.

Bibliography:

BFI, Unspecified author, ‘ The History of Attitudes to Disabled People’ http://www. bfi. org. uk/education/teaching/disability/thinking/#c19 [accessed 8. 05. 12]

Cox, Stephen quoted by Mark Tully in No Full Stop in India (London: Penguin Group, 1991), p. 58.

Duff, William, quoted by Jenny Newman, ‘ Mary and the Monster: Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and Maureen Duffy’s Gor Saga’, Chapter 5 of Where No Man Has Gone Before: Women and Science Fiction, ed. Lucie Armitt (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 87

Foucault, Michael, The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, trans. By Robert Hurley (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1978)

Gagnier, Regenia, Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 8.

Garfinkle, Norton, ‘ Science and Religion in England, 1790-1800: The Critical Response to the Work of Erasmus Darwin’ in Journal of the History Ideas Vol. 16, No. 3, June 1955 (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1955), p. 377.

Halberstam, Judith, ‘ Making Monsters’ in Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters (Durham NC: Duke WP, 1995), p. 29.

London, Kathleen, The History of Birth Control. Yale Newhaven Teacher’s Institute. Retrieved 10/05/2012 from http://www. yale. edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1982/6/82. 06. 03. x. html

Marshall, Tim, ‘ Frankenstein and the 1832 Anatomy Act’ In Gothick Origins and Innovations, ed. Allan Lloyd Smith and Victor Sage (Amsterdam; Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 57-64.

Mellor, Anne Chapter 6 of Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters (New York: Methuen, 1988), pp. 115-26.

Mellor, Anne K., ‘ Frankenstein: A Feminist Critique of Science (1987)’ in One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature, ed. George Levine and Alan Rauch (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 288.

Moers, Ellen, “ Female Gothic,” The Endurance of Frankenstein, ed. George Levine (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1979), p. 79.

Rose, Ellen Cronan, ‘ Custody Battles: Reproducing Knowledge about Frankenstein’ in New Literary History Vol. 26, No. 4, (Autumn 1995) The John Hopkins University Press, p. 811.

Said, Edward The World, the Text and the Critic (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts 1983), p. 35.

Shelley, Mary Frankenstein (Great Britain: Penguin Group, 1994)