

The novel frankenstein written in 1831 by mary shelley

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The novel *Frankenstein* written in 1831 by Mary Shelley is a tale that seems to expound on many of the ideas set forth in John Keats' "Ode on Melancholy." The thematic elements concur in their references to the unknown and to the unwanted and melancholic results of knowledge that lies beyond a certain threshold of life. Both works take on a very tenebrous tone and even hint at a certain inevitability in the coming of doom and the destruction of beauty. They might even be considered works that celebrate the sadder circumstances in life—which is in direct contrast to the unbridled optimism of many Romantic poets of the era. The monster created by Victor Frankenstein, as well as Frankenstein himself, enter the dreamlike and unknown territory of Lethe warned against by Keats, and in return find out first hand the inner workings of life's melancholy.

The very first line of Keats' poem warns against entrance into the unknown, as therein lies even more evidence of the grief that life can hold. He writes, "No, no, go not to Lethe..." (line 1). Lethe refers to a river found in the Greek mythologies that flowed through the underworld of Hades. This river is one that causes forgetfulness and in that way casts a shroud over reality that is similar to the misty and dreamlike sense created in the novel *Frankenstein*. Shelley does this using several devices, such as through the setting she creates. The story begins while the first narrator and Dr. Frankenstein sail together on a vessel in the dark and expansive waters of the Arctic. The atmosphere speaks volumes of the lack of clarity that is shown to exist on the earth. It also prefigures the idea of Dr. Frankenstein's forgetting (as on Lethe's waters) lessons learned from Faust about seeking too much that which lies beyond death.

It can also be seen from the very first letter written by Walton that life is itself shown to be unclear and unstable in its ability to mete out despair and melancholy no matter which actions are performed by the persons involved. Walton writes to Margaret: " And when shall I return? Ah, dear sister, how can I answer this question? If I succeed, many, many months, perhaps years, will pass before you and I may meet. If I fail, you will see me again soon, or never" (Shelley, 4). It is clear that life is like a voyage into the Arctic or on the river Lethe. What lies ahead is unknown and what happiness has past may easily be forgotten, as quickly as sadness may come.

Yet Keats' message is much more specific than the mere pointing out of the dreamlike nature of life. It goes further to deter men from seeking out the underside of life. He specifically warns against the deliberate seeking of things that are associated with death and the underworld. He speaks of the foolhardiness of twisting Wolfs-bane or allowing Proserpine (the goddess of the underworld) to kiss one's forehead (lines 1-4). This is significant in the novel Frankenstein as the actions performed by that doctor may be compared directly to what Keats warns against.

The doctor himself admits: " The moon gazed on my midnight labours, while, with unrelaxed and breathless eagerness, I pursued nature to her hiding places" (Shelley, 45). Frankenstein reveals that he deliberately seeks out the halls of death in his quest to give life to a cadaverous body. He goes beyond the call of the living man and ventures uninvited into the underworld to have his brow kissed by Proserpine. The warning Keats gives seems to be

merited as the consequences of his actions serve only to illuminate the more melancholy aspects of life.

A portentous smudge on Dr. Frankenstein's eagerness to infuse the dead body with his new concoction of life symbolizes the doom that is foretold by Keats for those who meddle with the things of death. Frankenstein describes his state during the times leading up to the creation of his monster, and he reveals, " I pursued my undertaking with unremitting ardour.

My cheek had grown pale with study, and my person had become emaciated with confinement" (Shelley, 44). This demonstrates the toll that his illicit actions were taking on his body. It is as though Proserpine's kiss of death were spreading through his body while he attempted to give life to the dead one lying on his table. The unfavorable circumstances that are yet to come are prefigured in this episode where Frankenstein seems to be transferring his own life to the cadaver on which he operates.

Keats goes on to speak of the fall of melancholy when " fit," and this demonstrates that sadness itself will lie in incubation during periods that seem happy. He writes, " But when melancholy fit shall fall sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud..." (lines 11-12). This demonstrates how in the fullness of time, melancholy itself will burst forth upon the heads of those who have performed the actions to deserve it. This is also true of the events of the novel Frankenstein. Once the scientific endeavor has been achieved, the Monster becomes a herald of fear and doom.

He also becomes the hand of premature death to several of the characters, all of whom were loved by Victor. Furthermore, Keats' comparison of

melancholy's "fall" to the weeping of a cloud makes it known that such sadness is a part of the cycle of life—and therefore gives the impression that there is no real need to seek it out, since it comes of its own accord anyway. Death would have come to Elizabeth, William, Justine and Frankenstein's father without the help of the monster that was created. There was no real need for the Dr. Frankenstein to create that artificial taker of life, since life itself has its own built-in machinery of death.

Yet Keats' solution to the fall of melancholy holds a cryptic message that appears difficult to interpret. It is necessary to dig deeply into its meaning before it can be reconciled with the events portrayed in Mary Shelley's novel. He indicates that when melancholy falls, one should "glut thy sorrow on a morning rose or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave or on the wreath of globed peonies" (lines 15-17). When one "gluts" or oversupplies something, this leads to a drop in the price of the thing.

Sorrow glutted upon these things of beauty causes itself to become cheap, and therefore easily acquired. It is difficult to see how this can be a solution to sorrow at all, since it merely proliferates it. However, it does support the thesis that sorrow is easily achieved in life; and it can also be seen to fit well with the ideas of the novel Frankenstein, in which the Monster goes on a rampage and gluts sorrow upon the happiness that once existed in Victor's world.

Yet, the glut of sorrow that Keats indicates exists in life is even more visible when one considers the condition of the Monster himself. The "life" into which he is brought is even more desolate and melancholy than that

experienced by real humans. He is the only one of his kind and is marginalized by his very dissimilarity to man. His hatred and wickedness is spawned directly from this fact—which is a direct result of Frankenstein’s “[twisting] Wolfs-bane [...] for its poisonous wine” (Keats, lines 1-2).

When the Monster speaks to Frankenstein, it is to display the condition to which he has been brought in life. He says, “ I am malicious because I am miserable. Am I not shunned and hated by all mankind?” (Shelley, 147) It is this immense sorrow that the Monster’s life has brought him that overflows in its surplus and gluts itself on the morning rose of everything that is good in Frankenstein’s life. It affects the promise of his friend and brothers’ lives, and causes the shedding of his wife’s bloom and beauty.

The ideas concerning the melancholy of life, which are reflected in this poem and novel, demonstrate several notions that are usually considered Romantic. The idea of something’s being Romantic gives the impression that it affects more gaiety than it really does possess. This can be shown to be true of the novel Frankenstein as the contentment that the doctor proposes to receive from fulfilling his plan is in direct contrast to what actually results from his work. Yet further ideas concerning Romanticism can also be extracted from these two works.

The moral and Romantic belief in the apocalyptic events (as those portrayed in the Bible) followed by an era of peace and serenity can be shown to be reflected to some extent in the texts of the Keats’ poem and Shelley’s novel. Shelley’s protagonist is hit upon by doom and destruction as a result of the actions he performed during his life. This is also demonstrated in the

melancholy that “ falls” in Keats’ poem as a result of the actions of one who deliberately seeks out the underside of the life. Similarly, Romantic (biblical) destruction of the earth is also purported to be a direct result of the actions of mankind. However, once the destruction is complete, peace returns to the earth.

This is seen to occur at the end of the novel Frankenstein when the monster destroys his maker and then wanders off to seek his own destruction. This appears to restore equilibrium to the world. Yet, this equilibrium cannot be said to be of the same optimistic quality as the “ peace and tranquility” that is supposed to follow the apocalypse. In fact, this equilibrium keeps itself closer to the theme of melancholy being present naturally within life, as it is a balance between good and evil that defines this equilibrium.

The novel Frankenstein by Mary Shelley and the poem “ Ode on Melancholy” by John Keats bear many similarities to each other. They contain the idea that seeking too much the things that lie beyond life will unleash a measure of death and sorrow that is not only unnecessary, but that will disrupt the gentle equilibrium that exists on earth. Life, in equilibrium, contains both joy and sorrow—so melancholy will come in good time without being sought.

The actions of Dr. Frankenstein prove Keats’ theory to be correct in that he pushes to see beyond life and finds the death and sorrow in greater abundance than that which he sought. The optimism typical of the romantics is challenged in the ideas of these writers, as even the return of life’s equilibrium means that death and sorrow will have as much freedom to harm humans as life and happiness to comfort them.

Works Cited

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