

# Dangerous knowledge – the negative effect of the pursuit of knowledge on society ...

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



Frankenstein by English author Mary Shelley (1797-1851) was birthed from a competition on “ who could write the best ghost story” between herself and a friend of hers, poet Lord Byron. On January 1, 1818 the manuscript was published and immediately became a bestseller during her time (SparkNotesEditors) This book has proved to be a classic and still resounds with readers till date as a variety of discussion topics pertaining to the sciences, the technologies and the societal views of women during the 19th century can be examined. One of these themes that recur throughout the book is the pursuit of knowledge and scientific discovery. In this paper Shelley’s perspective on the pursuit of knowledge and how it affects society will be discussed. The period during which Frankenstein was published is renowned in history as the Industrial Revolution. This period was characterized by “ massive economic, technological, social and cultural change” (Wilde). Scientific discovery and inventions were also prominent during this period.

Among these numerous scientific discoveries were “ investigations into the states of life and death” (Ruston). These investigations most likely served as an inspiration to Mary Shelley’s novel as a few years prior to the publication of Frankenstein there erupted a public debate between two surgeons from the Royal College of Surgeons on the nature of life itself. It was discovered that these surgeons, John Abernethy and William Lawrence were linked to the Shelleys. Lawrence was their family doctor while Percy, Mary’s husband, quoted Abernethy in his book. The early 19th century was also a period where philosophers and intellectuals were highly celebrated and valued in society. As a result, the early scholars were fascinated and committed to

their findings thereby devaluing human relationships and family. Through her book, Mary Shelley conveys how the thirst of knowledge for personal recognition and glory rather than societal gain could be detrimental. She explores the dangers of pursuing knowledge and scientific discovery if ethical concerns are not addressed (Ethics of creation).

In *Frankenstein*, the search for learning and knowledge is portrayed in three major characters i. e. Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein and the Monster. The book is comprised of the intertwining narratives of these male characters, hence giving the reader different perspectives to the dangers of knowledge. The first character we come across in the book is Robert Walton, an explorer and scientist who documents his adventures via letters to his sister, Margaret Saville. Walton is determined to surpass all other human explorations by reaching the North Pole. In his thirst for knowledge he longs to “sate his ardent curiosity with the sight of the world never before visited, and tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man” (Shelley). During Mary Shelley’s time such an adventure was deemed ridiculous and impossible. The author portrays this by showing that even though Walton was set on such a great quest, he was uncertain on the outcome of this journey.

In his first letter to Mrs. Saville he stated “I may there discover the wondrous power which attracts the needle and may regulate a thousand celestial observations that require only this voyage to render their seeming eccentricities consistent forever” (Shelley). Walton’s desire to tread on new lands might have led to his death as his ship got stuck between sheets of ice.

Combined with Victor Frankenstein's story on how his thirst for knowledge had led to his greatest misery, Walton then realizes the possible consequences of his expedition and results to abandoning his voyage.

Human beings, specifically scientists have always wondered about the secret of life and Victor Frankenstein, was no different. Upon his mother's death to scarlet fever, Frankenstein leaves for university with a bid to studying how to prevent death. However, when he rises to the top of his field at the university, his interest shifts to discovering the secret of life. He longs to create a new and noble race, a perfect being in size, strength and intelligence (enotes).

Shelley makes known Frankenstein's fervent desire to create a new race when he says that, "so much has been done, more, far more, will I achieve; treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation". Victor Frankenstein's quest of knowledge can be considered "obsessive and oppressive in nature" as he fails to care for himself while seeking answers to the mystery of creation and life (enotes). When recounting his story to Walton, Frankenstein acknowledges that his quest for knowledge had resulted to neglecting himself when he says that, "I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation" (Shelley). Frankenstein was too "involved in his own research that he lost touch with reality" and humanity, as he ignored his family and friends for years (Richardson) Victor Frankenstein's

arrogance towards creating a new race also leads to a form of heresy where he longs to be perceived as “ god”.

He states that a “ new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me” (Shelley). It is unclear as to whether Shelley was religious or not, but she clearly warns against such sacrilegious knowledge by depicting the intended “ perfect being” as turning out to be a monstrous creation who played a major role in the destruction of almost everyone dear to his creator. The Monster is the third character who yearns for knowledge that proves to be dangerous. Like humans, he desires to know who he is, who his creator is and how he can fit into the world he had been brought into. He ends up learning how to speak and read, he tries to fit in with human society but unfortunately realizes that he would never be able to live in the world of man. Being rejected by humanity births feelings of hurt, sorrow and fury. In addition, the knowledge he gained about himself leads him to curse his existence and blame his creator for abandoning him. In seeking revenge against his creator for making him a lone being, he resolves to destroy everyone dear to Victor Frankenstein. All three characters shared an ambitious pursuit of knowledge. However their quest was for personal gain rather than societal improvement. Walton was determined to be the first man to set foot in the north pole, Frankenstein was determined to unravel the secret of life and the monster was eager to fit in with society. Based on the outcomes that resulted from their journeys to enlightenment, Shelley shows that the pursuit of knowledge for personal gain instead of the good of mankind could be detrimental and

dangerous. She shows that even though Victor might have considered himself successful in discovering the secret of life, his success was accompanied by neglecting the ones dear to him resulting to severe tragedy and loss (BBC) . Mary Shelley also seems to emphasize on one's obligation to one's creation. The creation became a monster due to Frankenstein " taking flight" upon seeing the " wretch" he had created. His procrastination in dealing with his creature makes a monster out of a being who first longed to be accepted by humanity.

Shelley does not condemn creation, knowledge or science. Rather, she rebukes the quest of these for personal gain, and " she simple recognizes the ethical considerations that must be addressed when wielding scientific power" (Ethics of creation). She makes this clear when Frankenstein states that, " a human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquility. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful" (Shelley).

Scientific discovery and creativity has been the driving force to the thriving economic and social growth we are currently experiencing in the world. For Shelley, there should be a balance between scientific discovery and ethical responsibility. Frankenstein serves as a reminder that " science worth studying should not overwhelm one's life, nor should it produce arrogance that prevents the scientist from recognizing dangerous knowledge or taking

responsibility for his creations “(Ethics of creation). Rather, science should be for the benefit and the improvement of society as a whole.

## References

BBC. English Literature. n. d. 24 March 2015. . Enotes. What are some quotes from Frankenstein (by Mary Shelley) that show knowledge is dangerous? n. d. 24 March 2015. . Ethics of creation. n. d. 03 March 2015. . Richardson, Ruth. Frankenstein: graveyards, scientific experiments and bodysnatchers. n. d. 24 March 2015. . Ruston, Sharon. The science of life and death in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. n. d. 25 March 2015. . Saraswati, Swami Prakashanand. A review of the most popular scientific theories of the world. 1999-2001. 23 March