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number 24 March What do Frankenstein and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde Have to Say about Community? The novel Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus by Mary Shelley and the novella Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde by Robert Louis Stevenson are the diamonds of science fiction genre of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the former, which was first published in 1818, is considered to be the pioneer of elaborated sci-fi literature. On the other hand, Stevensons masterpiece, which was written decades later than that of Shelleys and published in 1886, has probably even more intricate and complex plot than Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus. In both of the books the protagonists are overambitious and dare to defy the laws of the universe. But in this short essay I will analyze in more detail another existential problem touched upon by both of the authors in their stories, namely, the treatment of the protagonists by the society and their attitude toward the communities they live in.
What makes both books similar is a wide, yet quite resembling, range of metaphysical and existential problems the supernatural events of the sci-fi storyboard are covering. The dark side of the protagonists in either Shelleys or Stevensons stories is revealed contrary to their expectations. The depth of the spiritual abyss, which protagonists of both stories found themselves in against their own will as a result of actions made in good faith, led to dire consequences and death of innocent people. Once anyone in a community takes on responsibility for breaking the worlds backbone and defying the laws of nature, the way either Victor Frankenstein in Shelleys novel or Dr. Jekyll in Stevensons novella have done, the payback comes inevitably.
Mary Shelley gave her book a title that contains the name of a hero from the ancient Greek mythology as an implication to the bitter end of her story. The legend about Prometheus becomes the key note of the whole book not by chance. According to the Greek mythology, Prometheus was the divine being responsible for creation of humankind. Complying with the desire of the supreme God named Zeus Prometheus made a human being in the image of god and taught men everything he knew. But then Prometheus got corrupted by humans and betrayed Zeus who had punished mankind for their wrong-doings. Zeus took the fire away from humans as a punishment, but Prometheus defied the odds and stole the fire from Zeus to give back to the people. In turn, Zeus decided to punish Prometheus for such impudence and tied him to the mountain to make suffer eternally. Just like in the legend about Prometheus, whose ambitions defied the rules, the protagonist of Shelleys novel is doomed from the start in spite the desire to act in the good faith for the sake of humanity, which spelled a complete disaster.
The protagonist of Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus Victor Frankenstein decided that he was ready to assume the burden of creator. Using his scientific knowledge Frankenstein created a creature that became a jetsam, an outcast suffering from loneliness and loathing to the world of people, for whom he, in turn, was an embodiment the darkest side of a man and a pure evil. The tragedy of the situation involved the inability of the creature to find its place in the community, no matter what it did, and the unwillingness of people to understand the needs and aspirations of the Frankensteins creature. Victor Frankenstein himself defied the right of his creature for normal life in human society. Frankensteins reluctance to understand the pain of being absolutely lonely and repulsed by each and everybody led to grave consequences and death of innocent people. As time passed and ugly Frankensteins creature realized the vain of its attempts to establish social interactions with members of any human community, his sense of being lonely turned into hatred to people. The leitmotiv of Shelleys story is an existential issue of loneliness and pain of being wasted upon. She resorted to a form of philosophical allegory to tell the story of cold-bloodedness, noninvolvement, vanity and betrayal. The most surprising thing is that however ugly the appearance of the Frankensteins creature was, his inner world was no different compared to that of normal people. In the beginning of the novel the Frankensteins creature seemed as naive and pure as a child in its attempts to bridge the gaps with his Victor Frankenstein, who gave it life but proved to be absolutely unable and unwilling to understand his desires. All other people the Frankensteins creature ever met did not take any trouble to understand it and gave no chance for communication. As it confessed, " There was none among the myriads of men that existed who would pity or assist me" (Shelley 119). Just as lonely people could be desperate in their deeds, Frankensteins creature was doomed from the start when it came to fighting its loneliness. It would burn villages, stalk its creator and kill innocent people out of despair. Acknowledging its absolute powerlessness in the situation that Victor Frankenstein created by going against the rules, he made one terrible mistake after another. Thus, the community expelled both the monster and its creator. But in the end one can hardly tell whether there was a monster at all or it was just the indifference of society that led to such a bitter end of both Frankenstein and his creation.
The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde contained the elements of the aforementioned Greek legend of Prometheus as well. Just like Victor Frankenstein uses his scientific knowledge in good faith but ends up unleashing the evil, Dr. Jekyll far-reaching objectives trying to make him better out of altruistic reasons. The experiments in his laboratory led him to creation of a portion that could separate his dark side, all his vices and evil thoughts from his personality. Dr. Jekyll hopes that the use of that portion will make the world a better place if everybody would get a chance to submit the dark side of ones personality. But instead of solving the philosophical problem of reconciliation of the dual nature of every human being within one personality Dr. Jekyll turns into a monster himself. He starts suffering from a split personality, which leads to grave consequences for both Dr. Jekyll and some other innocent people. Dr. Jekylls alter ego named Edward Hyde becomes his evil twin and start doing bad things to people. He hurts and even murders the innocent and in the end Dr. Jekyll has to pay for the wrong-doings that the dark side of his personality is responsible for. The lack of confidence in his own ability to be a good man and a productive member of the community leads Dr. Jekyll to unleashing and strengthening of all the evil that ever resided in him. The worst thing in this situation is the inability of Dr. Jekyll to control his evil twin who gains more of his personality day after day. Dr. Jekyll feels his absolute powerlessness and wants to shuffle off the load of responsibility on somebody else but realizes that nobody would ever understand him. As he confesses to his friend, Mr. Utterson, who has a murky past himself, " I wish you to judge for me entirely, I have lost confidence in myself" (Stevenson 34).
Just like Victor Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll goes against the laws of the universe and opens up a Pandora box. Because of such experiments with human nature Dr. Jekyll loses the ability to stay a productive member of society, while innocent people get hurt and die. In the end Dr. Jekyll suffered the same fate as that of Prometheus. Both of the authors deal with metaphysical issues by using exaggeration and allegory. Neither Dr. Jekyll nor Victor Frankenstein took trouble to think about the consequences of their experiments with human nature. Although both of the protagonists initially purported to make the world better with their inventions, the driving force of their experiments was either personal ambitions or lack of confidence. Nevertheless, irresponsibility and egocentrism of the protagonists were just the tip of the iceberg. The indifference of the members of society towards personal problems of each other was one of the underlying aspects of tragedy in both books. This lack of compassion in a community of people came in full force in the Shelleys story, while the Stevensons novella focused more on the paradoxical duality of human nature.
Works Cited
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