

### A Wordsworthian Reading of Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was published in 1818, in the middle of the Romantic period in England, though some debate its labeling as Romantic fiction. Another Romantic author, William Wordsworth, writes in his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" that Romantic literature is characterized by "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (Wordsworth 303). The three main characters in *Frankenstein* experience this same overflow of emotions throughout their expeditions exploring nature, and recollect them in the telling of their stories. In Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," he writes, "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her," which hints at the Romantic theme of reciprocity between mankind and nature (Wordsworth 291). While Robert Walton and the creature experience some form of reciprocity, Frankenstein and nature are at war. Because Mary Shelley explores a variety of relationships between man and nature, especially in the context of emotional encounters, *Frankenstein* exists within the Romantic tradition as illustrated by Wordsworth.

Written in three first-person narratives, *Frankenstein* provides immediate insight into the actions and emotions of the main characters in the novel. Robert Walton, in his letters to Mrs. Seville, shares his deepest thoughts with her, though paper is "a poor medium for the communication of feeling" (Shelley 10). In Walton's opinion, feeling is greater than can be conceived or conveyed in a mere letter. The importance of feeling is thus established in the primary pages of the novel, as is the need to communicate those feelings despite arising obstacles. Walton's utmost desire is for the "company of a man who could sympathize with [him]" and a footnote remarks that "sympathy" means to

“feel correspondingly” (10). Therefore, experiencing feelings does not suffice, but it is the sharing of and empathizing with the feelings of another human that is necessary. When Walton’s ship picks up Frankenstein while sailing in the North, Walton remarks, “his constant and deep grief fills me with sympathy and compassion” (16). The repetition of the word “sympathy” signals that Walton has found the friend he wished for, and is subsequently fulfilled emotionally. The importance of feeling, of emotion, and of human relationships is highly stressed throughout the shipman’s account of his voyage, though Walton’s interaction with nature is not emphasized until later in the novel.

Man’s relationship to nature is a defining characteristic of Romanticism that is exhibited throughout *Frankenstein* in the context of emotions. Robert Walton’s relationship to nature is one of acceptance and even pleasure, despite the Arctic climate. From the very beginning, Walton writes, “I feel a cold Northern breeze play upon my cheeks, and which braces my nerves and fills me with delight” (7). He is drawn further and further North by the promises and beauty of nature, which models the reciprocal relationship that Wordsworth describes. Walton and nature’s mutual exchange consists of back and forth beauty and admiration, which later changes. Even when nature becomes dangerous in the form of a storm, Walton wishes to continue onward, in exploration and appreciation of his surroundings; however, nature proves too powerful for Walton and his crew. When ice threatens to crush their vessel, the men turn southward to avoid death. Perhaps Walton’s quest to explore nature despite its protestations was influenced by Frankenstein’s tale of conquering nature itself. Their reciprocity broken, nature retaliated against Walton’s voyeuristic ideals with a storm that ended his quest.

Shelley's extensive demonstration of character's emotions continues with the dramatic Victor Frankenstein. In his narrative, Frankenstein is open in sharing his feelings, and he repeatedly expresses his grief and sadness. The intensity of his feelings surprises him, and he says, "No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane" (33). His emotional turmoil dictates his action, but usually his emotions are so strong that they actually lead to inaction. In the trial of Justine, he feels that "the tortures of the accused did not equal mine," which cripples him and results in nothing (56). While a passionate response to events is a characteristic of Romantic literature, Frankenstein feels too strongly, which results in others' demises.

The character whose relationship to nature is most prominent is indeed Victor Frankenstein. His extreme feelings are, in the beginning of the novel, often tempered or alleviated by nature. A detailed narrative of his travels includes vivid descriptions of nature, but always in relation to his emotions at the time of beholding. When on an excursion to the valley of Chamounix, Frankenstein says, "These sublime and magnificent scenes afforded me the greatest consolation that I was capable of receiving" (65). After hiking up to a glacier, Frankenstein's "heart...now swelled with something like joy" upon regarding the snow-covered mountain peaks (67). Frankenstein takes healing and joy from the beautiful sights of nature. It is interesting that Frankenstein's descriptions of emotion often present themselves in the form of a simile: "like a hurricane" (33). Only with the aid of nature can Frankenstein even express his feelings, and the two are intricately linked.

However, the relationship between Frankenstein and nature is non-reciprocal, especially when Frankenstein's monster gets out of control. Frankenstein consistently

takes whatever he wants from nature, be it solace, comfort, materials or nature's own functions. Because Frankenstein has tampered with nature in his creation of a monster, nature takes revenge on Frankenstein, for he has robbed Mother Nature of her primary role as life-giver and attempted to conquer her. Plagued by bad weather thrown at him by nature, Frankenstein somehow survives storm after storm. Nature has also prevented Frankenstein from creating a normal human being, but instead a monstrous being that inspires fear rather than the aid Frankenstein intended the creature to provide. Anne Mellor remarks that "Nature denies to Frankenstein both physical and mental health" (Mellor 363). Each time Frankenstein begins work on his heinous creation, he is plagued by "a slow fever" and he becomes nervous "to a most painful degree" (Shelley 51). Nature's ultimate revenge on Frankenstein, according to Mellor, is her denial of Frankenstein's child-making capabilities. As his wife is murdered on their wedding night, Frankenstein will have no opportunity to bring a normal, healthy child into the world through natural processes. Though Frankenstein has indeed created life, Jonathan Bate points out that *Frankenstein's* end "offers an image of nature's continuing power to resist the human quest for mastery," which makes nature more powerful than man (Bate 480). It is possible that nature's enacted vehemence on Frankenstein is uncharacteristic of the beneficent nature detailed in Romantic poetry. However, the fact that the two-way relationship between man and nature is so extensively detailed in the novel is a testament to the Romantic tradition.

Frankenstein's monster experiences tumultuous emotions as well, which humanizes him and once again highlights the Romantic theme of emotional proximity to events. The creature's original feelings of empathy and caring appear in his relationship

to the cottagers, despite never having experienced the same care from his creator. Simply overhearing a conversation leaves the creature in tears, as he “wept with Safie” over the fates of people he has never heard of on a continent he has never visited (Shelley 83).

These powerful and benevolent feelings shift from positive to negative as the creature is continuously maltreated. Shortly thereafter, the creature howls “with devilish despair and revenge,” and his hatred of mankind is cemented (119). On the final page of the novel, the creature declares, “I shall die, and what I feel now be no longer felt” (161). The acuteness to which the creature feels emotions of grief and despair becomes too much to bear, and he must die as a result.

The creature’s relationship to nature is a near-perfect model of Wordsworth’s reciprocity. While technically not *of* nature because he was created in a lab, the creature is always in close proximity with nature – it is nature that sustains the creature with roots, berries, and fire for his survival. Nature even provides a cloak for the monster’s warmth (70). The monster is awe-inspired and in wonder of nature, and speaks of it with tenderness and rapture. Most notably, the creature remarks, “My spirits were elevated by the enchanting appearance of nature; the past was blotted from my memory, the present was tranquil, and the future gilded by bright rays of hope and anticipations of joy” (80). Nature’s loving care for the creature creates a reciprocal relationship – both physically and emotionally. At the end of the novel, perhaps the kindest treatment nature can offer the creature is an escape from feelings: death. Bate remarks that “the Creature does finally return to the state of nature: he is swallowed up among the ice-floes of the North,” which one assumes means a cessation of existence (Bate 480).

The remarkably varied experiences of Walton, Frankenstein and the creature described by Mary Shelley portray different relationships between men and nature. Nature demands loyal devotion and adoration. In return, she provides care. However, if man is prideful and tampers with nature, vengeance will be exacted. Because nature will always “resist the human quest for mastery,” *Frankenstein* advocates a reciprocal relationship with nature, as it is the only way for man to survive (Bate 480). Because *Frankenstein* deals so intimately with Wordsworth’s notions of spontaneous emotions and nature/man reciprocity, the novel clearly exists within the Romantic tradition.

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