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Greatness is Overrated but Sometimes We Just Can't Help Ourselves:

An Analysis of *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley

It is natural for people to want to extend their lives and make a mark on history. People wish to surpass their predetermined confines and achieve greatness. This desire has propelled forward scientific advancement that earlier generations may have thought impossible. Yet, with greatness comes responsibility; stepping into the unknown can come at a moral cost. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, bold pursuits into the unknown lead to anguish, loneliness, and death. By using the novel's format, direct quotes, and allusions, Shelley frequently references Samuel Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" to support her warnings of such consequences. In Coleridge's tale, a mariner's impulse decision to kill an albatross on a wayward expedition becomes a burden that defines the rest of his life. Shelley uses the Mariner's narrative to explore the motives of *Frankenstein* characters Walton and Victor, as well as the consequences of their actions. Victor's hubris and egotism cause him to overstep his natural boundaries without considering moral implications, leading him to loneliness, regret, and a disconnection from the rest of the world. Yet even though he regrets his actions and cautions against them, Victor still idolizes unfettered boldness, suggesting that human egotism and emotion is stronger than our rational attempts to restrain it.

Victor and Walton share a common desire for greatness, which clouds their rational judgments and allows emotion to drive their actions. Though Walton's technical objectives involve the source of magnetism and the Northwest Passage, his real motives derive from his emotional sense of pride and his want for fame. He tells his sister of his "ardent curiosity" and

claims that she “cannot contest the inestimable benefit which [he] shall confer on all mankind to the last generation.” (Shelley 52). Walton wants to do something so great and revolutionary that it affects the entire human race for the rest of its existence. The rational dangers of his expedition are clouded by his lofty goals and his emotions; by calling his curiosity “ardent,” he suggests an intense passion. Walton elaborates, “It is impossible to communicate to you a conception of the trembling sensation, half pleasurable and half fearful, with which I am preparing to depart. I am going to unexplored regions, to ‘the land of mist and snow’” (56). The strength of his emotions is such that he is trembling. He also references the Mariner’s journey, acknowledging that he is going far beyond the lines of previous exploration. To reach the “land of mist and snow,” the Mariner’s ship had to drop “below the Kirk, below the Hill/ Below the Light-house top” (CP 42). In order to breach human limitations, the ship had to fall away from the morality of the church and the safety of the lighthouse. Therefore, Walton’s reference also suggests that he seeks to surpass human and moral rules. This is the moral grey area in which both Walton and Victor find themselves.

Victor rejects moral responsibility for his creation because, like Walton, he focuses only on his ego and is unprepared for the actual consequences. He reveals to Walton, “no one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success... a resistless, and almost frantic impulse, urged me forward” (Shelley 80, 81). Just like the “trembling sensation” that Walton describes, Victor is driven by his emotional ambition. This drives him to attempt to surpass human limits by encroaching upon nature’s domain; he recounts, “I pursued nature to her hiding places” (81). He attempts to capture the powers of nature for himself to feed his impulsive ambitions. Even though Victor seeks godlike powers, he does not recognize the moral responsibility that comes with power.

The aftermath of Victor's creation of the monster is a life of loneliness and regret. This is as a consequence of his rejection of rationality and moral responsibility. Immediately upon creating the monster, Victor is horrified and flees. He remembers, "The beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart" (84). He becomes overcome by horror and paranoia because he had worked towards his goal with such fervor that, once reality clashes with his ambitions, he is pummeled by guilt. Shelley describes his state by quoting from the Rime of the Ancient Mariner, "Like one who, on a lonely road,/ Doth walk in fear and dread;/ And, having once turn'd round, walks on,/ And turns no more his head;/ Because he knows a frightful fiend/ Doth close behind him tread" (85). Though this "fiend" has a physical manifestation as the monster, the "fiend" also acts as Victor's associated guilt. After the Mariner kills the albatross, his guilt manifests itself in different ways. Guilt is at times an inescapable "frightful fiend" that is always in his shadow and is also a physically large, heavy bird that hangs around his neck. Victor frequently alludes to a similar large weight because he, like the Mariner, feels the responsibility of his actions weighing down upon him and redefining his life as one of regret. For example, Victor recalls, "the blood flowed freely in my veins, but a weight of despair and remorse pressed on my heart, which nothing could remove... Sleep fled from my eyes; I wandered like an evil spirit" (111). The burden of responsibility represses Victor's liveliness; forced to "wander," he loses his sense of direction and purpose. He equates himself to an "evil spirit," in a state of despondency similar to that of the Mariner. Weighted by his sins, the Mariner agonizes, "Alone, alone, all all alone... And a million million slimy things/ Liv'd on – and so did I" (CP 49). Both Victor and the Mariner begin to see themselves as evil and sinful beings. As a consequence of trespassing into nature's domain and taking nature's power for themselves, they become isolated. Instead of being one of the many men and dying in grace, the Mariner becomes

one of the “slimy things.” Similarly, Victor’s fears and paranoia hinder his ability to interact meaningfully with his family and, as his actions lead to the deaths of his loved ones, he becomes an “evil spirit.” This isolates Victor, who acknowledges, “I saw an insurmountable barrier placed between me and my fellow-men; this barrier was sealed with the blood of William and Justine” (Shelley 168). He is forced to battle the consequences of his actions alone because his unnatural powers of creation isolate him from the masses. Thus, Victor’s emotional pursuits of greatness end up burdening him with immense regret.

These consequences lead Victor to frame his story to Walton as a cautionary tale, yet ultimately neither he nor Walton is willing to repress his emotional ambitions in favor of rationality. Upon meeting Walton, Victor acknowledges, “You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did” (62). After concluding his narrative, he elaborates on the consequences of his incredible feat, which granted him with a strong sense of superiority. He says, “This feeling, which supported me in the commencement of my career, now serves only to plunge me lower in the dust” (210). Victor clearly attempts to impress upon Walton the values of morality and the company of others, as he reflects upon the loneliness that scarred his life. In fact, this reflection echoes the warnings of the Mariner to his listener, “O sweeter than the Marriage-feast,/ ‘Tis sweeter far to me/ To walk together to the Kirk/ With a goodly company” (CP 61). Victor, like the Mariner, recognizes in retrospect the moral consequences that come with trying to rise above human abilities. On his deathbed, Victor urges Walton to “seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition” (Shelley 216). Victor denounces the egotism that drove him to an early and lonely death and is very clear in his warnings regarding the pursuit of glory. In recognizing Walton’s emotional attachment to ambition as the source of his own isolation, Victor realizes there is still time to deter Walton from a similar fate. Thus, Victor’s entire life story serves as an

urgent warning for Walton to reassess his priorities and find happiness by rejecting ambition. However, this cautionary tale ultimately goes unheeded when Victor and Walton both prove incapable of personally restraining their ambitions.

Though Victor exhibits rationality through the reflection of his experiences, both he and Walton instead prioritize their emotional desire for recognition and fame when confronted with a choice in the present-day. As their journey becomes increasingly dangerous, Walton's crewmembers decide to turn back to England upon escaping the ice that traps them. Yet Walton despairs, "I had rather die, than return shamefully – my purpose unfulfilled" (214). He has not internalized Victor's cautions; even if he understands the risks of ambition on a rational level, his ego is emotional. The emotional feelings he describes regarding ambition, such as "trembling" and "pleasurable," cannot be reined in by his rational understandings. He only ends up returning to England through the coercion of his shipmates, who provide the external rationality that Walton cannot summon up himself to rein in his actions. Moreover, even after personally experiencing its downfall, Victor is also unable to tear himself away from the pursuit of glory. He angrily snaps at Walton's crew, "Behold, with the first imagination of danger, or, if you will, the first mighty and terrific trial of your courage, you shrink away... Do not return to your families with the stigma of disgrace marked on your brows. Return as heroes" (214). The ambition that Victor renounced during his narrative is now "mighty" and "terrific," and the rejection of such ambition is disgraceful. These statements are in complete contrast to Victor's entire tale of the dangers of egotism. The repetition of his tale is, in the end, unnecessary, much like the Mariner's forced reiterations of his experience. Just like the Mariner cannot escape from his rut of endlessly repeating his story, Victor cannot escape from his emotional ties to ambition. Neither benefits from his experience because neither ends up utilizing what he has learned. In the

case of Walton and Victor, this inability to apply rational knowledge is due to the emotional magnitude of their ambitions.

Victor's hubris and obsessive ambition cloud the moral consequences of his endeavors and are ultimately the source of his isolation and destruction. He attempts to warn Walton of these consequences but, though he can rationally reflect upon his life in retrospect, he cannot follow his own advice in reality. Both he and Walton are unable to rationally constrain themselves because their ambitions are rooted in emotion. People's obsessive want to stand out ends up isolating them from real interactions with others and can be the source of deep regret and loneliness instead of fame. When faced with choosing between our own ambitions and reflective or logical reasoning, we often sweep aside rationality while allowing our emotions to cloud the consequences of egotistic action. The pursuit of glory can lead to incredible discovery but is often sought at the expense of reason.

Works Cited

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. 3rd ed. Claremont, Canada: Broadview Editions, 2012. Print.