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The Fate of Frankenstein: Triumph of Nature over Science or Punishment to Selfishness?

Much has been written about the doubtless pioneer value of *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus* as a work of science fiction, and many analysis have been done on the complex situation that the human being faced in those early moments of the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution and the unstoppable rise of science and technology put at the service of the human mind. In fact, this critical approach of “man against nature” has been one of the most generally acclaimed, if not the most. According to Bill Phillips, Victor’s scholar environment and his own creature symbolise “both the horrors of unrestrained technology and the hellish conditions now associated with the process of nineteenth century industrial production itself”(Phillips, 59). However, the tragic fate of Victor Frankenstein is not only the triumph of nature over a challenge to their basic laws, but also a matter of the most elemental. And there are several reasons to support this point of view.

First of all, it is easily understandable why the main debate about this work has frequently been the much-discussed challenge to the rules set by nature: the creation of life by other means than those purely natural and biological. In a context of effervescent growth, spurred by the force with which the Enlightenment broke into the Europe of the late seventeenth century, the fact of "playing God" establishes a moral debate whose strength can

easily be imagined when we realise that even today, two-hundred years later, it remains a controversial issue.

When young Victor arrives to Ingolstadt to begin their studies, he is devoured by a thirst for knowledge and research. Scientific advances in research about the functioning of the human body were at their peak on those days, and Victor is immersed in a kind of creative ecstasy that almost consumes him.

However, Victor's personality makes us wonder whether if his tragic life is the result of his challenges -from a moral point of view- to nature or the result of his own personality. For he is a most selfish, egocentric man. A clear example of that is his inability to understand the consequences of his actions, as mentioned before. To begin with, Frankenstein immediately neglects the Creature, from which he flees in terror at the very moment of its creation. That gives us a hint of what kind of protagonist can Victor be. As Syndy M. Conger inquired: "What hero would wish to escape so quickly from self-created responsibility?" (Conger, 62). To abandon a being that he has created implies a total lack of sense of fatherhood and the responsibility inherent to that paternity, but Victor does not show at any time the slightest sign of regret for this abandonment so abrupt and cruel, nor he cares about the welfare or feelings of not only his creation, but also those around him.

Victor's boundless egotism is specially interesting if we relate it to all the events that take place throughout the story and are determined precisely by it. For example, his attitude towards Elizabeth or even about his friend Henry Clerval is almost patriarchal, patronising and never interested in the feelings or desires of his loved ones. He always speaks well of them and mentions constantly how much he appreciates them, but never does he meet their needs and supplications, nor he even considers the possibility that these wishes could be more important than his pursuit of scientific relevance or fulfilling his personal purposes .

This selfishness reaches worrying levels when Victor seems blind to see the misfortunes that start happening around him, despite the very obvious pattern of death that the reader of the story can see from the very beginning. Instead of acting and take control of the situation when deaths that he rightly suspected to be associated with the creature begin to occur, he prefers to remain silent letting innocent people like Justine, Clerval and ultimately Elizabeth end up dead. Far from understanding the gravity of his responsibility, Victor seems to take pleasure in lamenting about his bad luck, considering himself a martyr and claiming that he is the biggest victim of them all, as he assures after Elizabeth's death –“no creature had ever been so miserable as I was” (*Frankenstein*, 239). This can easily be identified with what epistemologist and moral philosopher C.D. Broad called “Psychological Egoism”, which he described as the result of several kinds of desire that ultimately lead the human being to “behave according to motives that are either self-regarding or self-referential”.

How can such a selfish and self-centered man successfully escape from that situation? The different emotional blows that he ultimately receives and that leave him on the edge of madness are the logical and fair response to his actions and his rejectionist attitude. In the end, Victor continually regrets his decisions but does nothing to prevent, or at least to soften the consequences of them. He refuses to take part because he always puts his own good ahead of all other concerns, always believing he is right when he tries to justify himself, even though this may have fatal consequences for his loved ones. This selfishness, even in his final hour, leads Victor to demand from Robert Walton the completion of his ultimate wish of murdering the creature. It is much surprising that Victor seems blind to see that his hate to the Creature cannot be justified other than by fear or terror, whereas the Creature's attitude, however, can be understood as a logical consequence of Victor's –among others– neglect.

Frankenstein plays God by creating life, trying to dominate nature, but also seems to consider himself as a god outside the laboratory whose decisions are always correct and justified by his pride. But the point is that he fails to identify himself with anyone, and most surprisingly, with the Creature, as Barbara Johnson remarked: “Frankenstein ... rejects in the monster a resemblance he does not wish to acknowledge” (Johnson, 110). For in the end both have become mirror images of one another, experiencing sorrow and trying to seek revenge in a failed attempt to alleviate the grief they are experiencing.

Did Mary Shelley, then, pretend to establish a moral lesson about scientific advances in relation to human life and the triumph of nature over those who defy it? Or did she simply deny success in his efforts to a man whose selfishness prevents him from properly interacting with the rest of society? In other words, would we be talking about a different story –or at least, an end– if the protagonist, despite his mistakes, had had more humanity and generosity, more empathy with which he had acted differently? We will never know and we can only wonder about it, but if there is an idea that many can certainly identify with is the following: a human being like Victor cannot, in justice, be successful in his endeavours.

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