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Dr. Daniels

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Frankenstein and the French Revolution

Some of the most inspiring works ever written were, at their core, an outlet for the expression of the writer's societal viewpoints and opinions. By incorporating important messages within the context of popular novels, authors have the ability to influence the opinions and preconceptions of a large audience of readers. Some writers have been able to use this power to make strong statements concerning their interpretations of controversial topics. Mary Shelley is one of these authors. She uses the story of *Frankenstein* to express her views on the French Revolution and the treatment of the lower class. This is most clearly seen through the analysis of her personal history, the parallelism she draws between the poor masses and the monster versus the upper classes and Frankenstein, and the specific references she makes to historic sites and events. She goes on to incorporate her own opinions regarding the causes and the people at fault for the Revolution through her portrayal of the innocence of the dead, sympathy for the monster, and the recklessness of Frankenstein. Through historical accounts, literary criticisms and in-text analyses we come to see that *Frankenstein* was much more than a just a fantastical story; it was a commentary on mass revolution and social injustice.

Mary Shelley and her husband Percy studied the French Revolution and the authors of it personally and extensively. According to *The Political Geography of Horror in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* by Fred Randen, they both read and wrote about Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "The intellectual father of the Revolution" during their stay in Geneva in eighteen sixteen (1796). Mary Shelley had also inherited many political ideals from her father William Godwin, who identified

closely with the far left. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Godwin began “epitomizing the optimism of events in France at the time he began writing.” Shelley reflects her belief that all men are good, but at the same time are susceptible to societal ills through the initial harmlessness of the monster. This is yet another political ideal she adopted from her father, who argues more specifically that governments have the power to turn people evil. Godwin studied the teachings of other revolutionists, such as Thomas Paine, in the formulation of his views and in the writing of his books. Because Percy worshipped Mary’s father and his writing, she was continuously surrounded by these views even after they fled together. Shelley was also bombarded with propaganda surrounding the revolution outside of the home. As stated in *Revolutionary Readings: Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and the Luddite Uprisings* by Edith Gardner, during the eighteen sixteens, near the time she started her work on this novel, the monster had begun to symbolize political unrest. Conservative journals employed images of “grave- robbing, reviving the dead, and monsters who turn on their creators and destroy them, to warn of the dangers of liberal reform” (72). Mary Shelley used in her writing symbols that were already established as having political affiliations. As we come to realize the strong political views of her family and her clear allusion to political liberalism and upheaval, we can see quite clearly her biases and intentions, and how they relate to her story of Frankenstein.

Mary Shelley also masterfully constructs the monster to represent the lower class and Frankenstein to represent political officials and those of a higher status. As stated in the article, *(R)Evolutionary Images in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* by Chikage Tanabe, the monster’s continuous rebellion against Frankenstein “...reminds us of the basic concept of the French Revolution, that is, the rebellion against the King (a father figure)...” (51). Frankenstein’s creation did not start out in total opposition to his father, however. The monster believed that

Frankenstein owed him certain rights and privileges; this was his responsibility as the one in power. Because the monster placed no value on material goods, he tasked Frankenstein with the creation of a being like himself, so that he could have a companion. The monster believed that he had a right to rebel, only after Frankenstein failed his duties. Gardner also reveals a key parallel between the monster's killings and the murders that were carried out during the Luddite disturbances, wherein "the poor laborers and their advocates believed that the government had a duty to listen to its people, and to provide the basic necessities to which they have a right" (73). With the start of the Industrial Revolution, highly skilled workers were being replaced by machines and unskilled immigrants. Left with no governmental aid, and no other options, these craftsmen "eventually turned to rick- and stack-burning, to the destruction of property owned by their employers, and to bloodshed and murder" (74). Though the Luddites wanted things much different than that of the monster, they were forced to resort to violence and felt that they had a right to do so, as they were failed by their own government. Just like Frankenstein was warned by the monster, so too was the French government through countless petitions. If both powers had heeded these warnings, lives could have been saved. Gardner's article also draws on important similarities regarding Frankenstein's desires to exploit nature in the creation of the monster to award himself glory and recognition. She relates this to the so called "Bourgeoisie capitalism," in which wealthy, upper class business owners attempted similar exploitations for capital gains. In both instances, in trying to take advantage of the environment, the perpetrators experienced extreme retaliation. By taking into account the aggregate of these parallels, we come to see that there were clear political drives behind Shelley's plot developments.

The author also acted with extreme intention in choosing the settings of these major events to relate her story back to the Revolution. In his article on this very topic, Randen states

that Ingolstadt, the place where Frankenstein physically created the monster, was where Adam Weishaupt founded a secret society called the “Illuminees.” This is the place where the conspiracy of the French Revolution was first born (466). By equating these two situations with geographic location, Shelley is making a statement that both men created something there that was beyond their control, something that spiraled into a storm of avoidable, yet unequalled pain and destruction. The article also relates St. Petersburg, the place where Walton sends off his first letter, to the “...scene of [the revolution’s] putative endings...” where Napoleon intended to initially arrive in his eighteen twelve invasion of Russia (467). It equates the French soldiers’ trek along the icy and barren landscapes of Russia to Frankenstein’s pursuit of the monster through the freezing tundra. This source continues to reveal that Plainpalais Geneva, where the monster murdered William, also houses a monument dedicated to Rousseau. It is additionally the site of eleven political executions that took place during the revolution. The combination of both the tribute and these deaths show Shelley’s attempt to convey Rousseau’s principle philosophy “that all human beings are naturally good... but society has imposed its evil ways upon [them]” (471). Justine’s unjustified death, which also takes place in Geneva, is said to be related to the Revolutionary Tribunals held there the summer after the initial executions, in which four more people were sentenced to death with almost no proof of wrong doing. Finally, the death of Henry Clerval in Ireland is cited to have been representative of the Irish rebellions, which were inspired by the Revolution in France. These important and numerous allusions to history again help us realize the true political statements behind Shelley’s novel.

As with all other uprisings and disturbances, many lives were lost to this revolution. Murders, tribunals and executions preyed on both the blameless and the guilty. Mary Shelley makes it a point in her novel to kill off the most innocent of the characters to show the brutality

of the French Revolution and to emphasize that more should have been done to stop it. From the very start of the story, the readers were trained to love Elizabeth. She was described as “The living spirit of love” (Shelley 20) “The best hope, and the purest creature of earth” (Shelley 144). Victor Frankenstein had adored her from the moment that his parents brought her home. She comforted the family in times of loss, and kept Frankenstein sane when things first started to go wrong with the monster. By explaining Elizabeth in this way, the author is making a statement about the unjustness in her death and the deaths of those who lost their lives to the revolution. Henry was also consistently portrayed as a guiltless character. Shelley writes “[He was] so perfectly humane, so thoughtful in his generosity—so full of tenderness and kindness... [he] made doing good the end and aim of his soaring ambition” (Shelley 20). Like Elizabeth, he also possessed an innate goodness; but more than her, he had a bright future. The author describes his drive and ambition, and how if allowed to pursue them, he would have made the world a better place. Shelley presents him in this way to emphasize that all of the potential that was lost with these lives outweigh any of the benefits that came out of the Revolution. Lastly, though we don’t meet Justine until later in the novel, only the best was ever said of her. In Elizabeth’s testimony of her innocence, she describes Justine as “the most amiable and benevolent of human creatures” (Shelley 56). Frankenstein himself depicts her as “A girl of merit [who] possessed qualities which promised to render her life happy” (Shelley 54). Just as with Henry, the author makes clear that Justine was robbed of the promising future that she would undoubtedly have had. She is able to capture the feelings of grief and suffering felt by many during that time, and project them onto the reader. Through these deaths, she ultimately concludes that the Revolution wasn’t worth the lives lost. This appeal to pathos helps the readers understand the moral obligations that

those in power had to make sure that the plight of the poor didn't reach a point in which they were forced to resort to this violence.

Though at the conclusion of the story, we come to see the monster as a violent and merciless killer of the innocent, it is important to remember that he wasn't always that way. Shelley is able to masterfully denote the goodness of the monster through his initial harmlessness. She does this with the purpose of ultimately portraying the innocence of those who participated in the revolution. This creature was, from the start, capable of human emotion. He had the capacity to love and to feel pleasure, and even put forth continuous efforts to incorporate these in his life. In his account to Frankenstein, the monster pleads, "Believe me Frankenstein: I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone?" (Shelley 69) We can see that the monster recognized the potential within himself to obtain affection, yet he knew that if he could not receive it, he could also not give it away. This connects closely to what the supporters of the revolution felt. They, like everyone else, were just trying to make a life for themselves yet were denied this opportunity. It was because of this that they were forced to do things that were not of their nature. He furthers this idea when he explains, "If I have no ties and no affections, hatred and vice must be my portion; the love of another will destroy the cause of my crimes" (Shelley 106). Through this, it becomes clear that the monster not only acknowledges, but seeks the thing that will allow him to let go of his anger and hatred. Although he has already done wrong he believes whole-heartedly that, if given the opportunity, he could turn things around. The monster in this sense, was made to represent the way that the poor masses felt. They had no desire to inflict such pain or violence, but they were left with no other options. The desperate situations that they were in, were the causes of their

actions, not a pre-programmed will to do evil. If the government was only willing to give them the help that they needed, the lives and the innocence of many could have been saved.

Lastly, Mary Shelley builds the story in a way that places the blame and responsibility on Victor Frankenstein. She does this with the intent of expressing her belief that though the revolution was carried out by the poorer masses, it is the upper classes and the government that are at fault for it. Throughout the whole novel, the monster and Frankenstein himself acknowledge his guilt in the deaths of the characters. In regarding Justine's death, Frankenstein proclaims, "Now all was to be obliterated in an ignominious grave, and I the cause" (Shelley 54), and "Remorse extinguished every hope. I had been the author of unalterable evils" (Shelley 62). Though the doctor was not the one who physically murdered Justine, it was clear that it was the result of the creation that he was responsible for. Her death was therefore on his conscience. The guilt that he feels now is irreconcilable because lives have already been lost. This idea relates to the fact that although the upper classmen were not the ones carrying out the execution orders, or murdering people in the streets, they had a duty and a responsibility to help out the poor, so that the situation would not get to where it was. Because they failed in this they are, at heart, liable. The monster, as well, is forthright in his intentions; whatever he decided to do would rely directly on the decisions that Frankenstein made. He states, "You have heard my story and can decide. On you it rests, whether I quit forever the neighborhood of man and lead a harmless life, or become the scourge of your fellow creatures, and the author of your own speedy ruin" (Shelley 70). The monster outright declares that if his demands aren't met, people will die. Frankenstein was capable of fulfilling the monster's requests, yet decides not to. He lacked the will, not the ability to do the right thing. In a similar fashion, the rich and the powerful in France, were informed of the grievances of the struggling and warned of what would happen if they were

not addressed. They had both the money and the means to help, but decided not to. It was for this decision that many paid their lives.

By taking a look at the influences outside of the novel and the themes and details within, we are able to get a much more holistic view of the author's messages and intents. We see that Mary Shelley's tale of fiction and horror is more profoundly a vessel for her views and perspectives on the French Revolution and societal upheaval. Her personal experiences, projection of upper and lower class citizens onto Frankenstein and the monster, and her use of historical developments relay to us the true intentions behind this novel; as does her depiction of the guiltless nature of the victims, initial harmlessness of the monster and the flaws of Frankenstein. As the readers, it is our job to identify, and ultimately react to the stories of injustice that she masterfully, yet subtly includes.

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