Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

Posted on May 31, 2018

Knowledge, Ambition, and the Central Conflict of Frankenstein

In her 1818 masterpiece *"Frankenstein*," Mary Shelley describes humanity's relentless pursuit of knowledge and the struggles that come with it. Shelley does not depict knowledge as an empowering and illuminating force. She does this by characterizing the ambitious Captain Robert Walton, the restless Victor Frankenstein, and the lonely and misunderstood creature, all of whom wish to obtain knowledge somehow (Shelley, 1818/2008).

Captain Robert Walton wants to find a way to create a passage through the Arctic Sea. Victor Frankenstein desires nothing more than to find a way to defeat the monster he created, and the creature wishes to know the reason behind his creation. In this compelling science-fiction novel, Shelley conveys to her readers through some of her characters that sometimes obtaining too much knowledge can lead to disastrous consequences. She emphasizes that the quest for knowledge results in self-destruction (Shelley, 1818/2008).

Victor Frankenstein's quest to find out "the secret to life" motivates him to create a monster by joining the body parts of dead men and using electricity to insert life into an unanimated being after countless days and nights of research and study. Victor himself is astonished by the power of his knowledge and ponders upon the ways of using it but despite his "longtime concern," he takes the action that leads to the destruction of himself and his beloveds. Victor ignores his conscience, creates the monster, and plays the part of God because of his desire to find out the secret to life.

The Monster's Education and the Inescapable Power of Learning

"Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind when it has once seized on it, like a lichen on the rock." These lines tell us how the monster perceives knowledge. To him, knowledge has an everlasting effect that can be irreversible. The author discusses the addictive quality of knowledge using the monster as the mouthpiece. We, as humans, are wired with curiosity. The curiosity leads to learning. We are born with the desire to continuously make progress like Captain Walton who desires to conquer the uncharted world, i.e., to cross our limits. The quest for knowledge only ends with total human extinction. Shelley implies that the simple act of seeking knowledge can change a man forever (Shelley, 1818/2008).

“One man’s life or death were but a small price to pay for the acquirement of the knowledge which I sought, for the dominion I should acquire and transmit over the elemental foes of our race.” In these lines, Robert Walton, the sailor, appears to be willing to give away his life for the greater good of humanity. It also foreshadows the perilous path on which Walton is going. Walton believes that if one knows something unknown to the world, then risking one’s life is worth it. Shelley wants to suggest here that the quest for knowledge starts with a noble cause and that the knowledge is for the greater good of humankind just like Robert Walton’s quest in the Atlantic Ocean to discover a northern passage that will cut short the travel time markedly and save the time, fuel and energy of men. Victor identifies self-deception in Walton’s heroic journey because he was like Walton once. He knows that the glorious dream of greatness is a destructive arrogance, so he hopes that Walton’s wishes do not become a serpent that stings him. After comparing Frankenstein’s story with Walton’s quest, one realizes that his quest would end up like Frankenstein’s if he did not stop.

“Learn from me…how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow.” In these lines, Victor tries to warn Walton. He asks Walton to learn from his mistake. Frankenstein knows that intense light can blind a person, but too much knowledge can also blind a person from the right path. Victor’s quest for knowledge has raised him above his station, and his creation is not in his control which destroys him and his loved ones thus he pays a heavy price for his mistake. A man should know his limits and be content to remain within those limits. After all the study and research he could not reach the level of God which suggests that the powers with which Victor has played belong only to him who can control his creature and not to the weak human beings. Thus, the destructive impulse for “forbidden” knowledge must be repressed (Shelley, 1818/2008).

Suffering, Self-Awareness, and the Tragic Consequences of Knowledge

“… sorrow only increased with knowledge.” This quote contains the essence of the novel. The monster says these words to Victor Frankenstein while narrating his story. The knowledge that the monster learned from eavesdropping on his neighbor causes him to suffer. The knowledge helps to know that he is different from the other people and cannot be a part of society because the people will not accept him, so his disgust and hatred for the society grow. He says he would prefer to live in the secluded forest, ignorant of everything except food. Despite the fact that he knows that pursuing knowledge increases his depression, he does not stop himself from seeking knowledge because of his curiosity to know more about himself. It is due to this curiosity that he gets beaten by Felix. Moreover, the monster’s knowledge gave birth to a desire that can never be fulfilled, i.e., a companion, which caused him to suffer even more. The knowledge that he has killed his creator fills him with guilt due to which, along with the suffering of loneliness, he commits suicide at the end of the novel.

“I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you

apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections and destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind." These words said by Victor Frankenstein in Captain Walton's ship reflect Mary Shelley's thoughts about her contemporary trends. In the early 1800s, new findings aroused the people's pursuit of knowledge. "The pursuit of knowledge" motivated Victor to create the monster which shocked them. He knows he has made a mistake by not regulating his "pursuit of knowledge." When he was engaged in research to insert life within the dead, he secluded himself from his family, friends, and the outside world. His dedication to knowledge made him emaciated, weak, and pale. Now that he is aware of the consequences of his tremendous obsession with studying, he tries to advise Captain Walton, who sails in the cold waters in search of something he yearns for while risking his own life. Victor suggests to him that his quest of knowledge has weakened his affection for his loved ones which is why he has come a long way from his home and "pleasures" in search of a sailing route in the ice-covered seas. The study that takes you away from the world and does not let you enjoy life then it is not benefiting anyone, so it is unlawful. Knowledge sows the seeds of despair in the mind of the person who is obsessed with it. Therefore, knowledge is dangerous (Shelley, 1818/2008).

References

Shelley, M. W. (2008). *Frankenstein; or, The modern Prometheus*. Project Gutenberg. (Original work published 1818). https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/84