

The Transformation Of Victor Frankenstein's Character

Posted on October 14, 2019

Introduction

Victor Frankenstein's transformation is the central tragedy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. He begins the novel as an affectionate, intellectually ambitious young man who believes that knowledge can enlarge human power and reduce suffering. By the end, he is physically ruined, emotionally isolated, and consumed by revenge. The change is not caused by scientific curiosity alone. Victor's downfall grows from the way he pursues knowledge, refuses responsibility for what he creates, conceals the truth, and repeatedly allows pride and fear to determine his choices. (Shelley, 2012; Mellor, 1988)

The original discussion correctly identified a movement from optimism to despair, but Victor's character is more complicated than a simple contrast between a healthy student and a dying man. His ambition is present from childhood, and his tendency to idealize himself survives even after disaster. He recognizes some of his errors, yet he also continues to blame the creature and to present himself as a victim of extraordinary circumstances. Shelley therefore uses Victor's transformation to explore responsibility, secrecy, parenthood, isolation, and the danger of seeking glory without accepting the obligations that follow success. (Mellor, 1988)

Victor Before the Experiment

Victor describes his childhood as unusually happy. He is raised in a loving Geneva household and forms close bonds with Elizabeth Lavenza and Henry Clerval. This background matters because it shows that he is not initially deprived of affection. He knows what care looks like. When he later abandons the being he creates, the failure cannot be explained by ignorance of human attachment. Victor has received patience, education, and protection, but he does not extend those gifts to his creature. (Shelley, 2012)

His intellectual development also reveals the mixture of imagination and pride that shapes his later conduct. As a boy, he becomes fascinated with writers such as Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Albertus Magnus. Their speculative promises appeal to him because ordinary knowledge seems too limited. He does not merely want to understand nature; he wants access to its deepest secrets. He recalls that "the secrets of heaven and earth" were what he desired to learn. The statement expresses genuine wonder, but it also suggests dissatisfaction with the boundaries accepted by other people. (Shelley, 2012)

At the University of Ingolstadt, Victor encounters modern chemistry and natural philosophy. His professor M. Waldman gives scientific ambition a new direction by describing the achievements of recent researchers. Victor quickly imagines himself adding something unprecedented to human knowledge. His goal initially appears benevolent. If he can discover the principle of life, he believes he may conquer disease and make humanity grateful to him. Yet his language repeatedly returns to personal distinction. He imagines “a new species” blessing him as its creator. The desire to benefit others becomes inseparable from the desire to be revered. (Shelley, 2012; Mellor, 1988)

Ambition Becomes Obsession

The decisive transformation begins before the creature opens its eyes. Victor withdraws from family, friendship, health, and ordinary moral life while constructing the body. He studies decay in charnel houses and dissecting rooms, works through the seasons, and ignores letters from home. Shelley describes not a sudden accident but a long period in which Victor repeatedly chooses secrecy and isolation. The project narrows his vision until the future glory of success matters more than the present cost of his behavior. (Shelley, 2012)

This obsession changes his body as well as his relationships. He becomes pale, thin, anxious, and unable to enjoy the natural world. The physical decline anticipates the condition in which Walton later finds him in the Arctic. Victor’s body records the damage produced by uncontrolled ambition. Shelley does not reject study or discovery; the novel contains intelligent, sympathetic characters who value learning. The danger arises when one pursuit absorbs every other duty and when the researcher treats moral reflection as an obstacle to achievement. (Shelley, 2012; Mellor, 1988)

Victor also fails to plan for success. He thinks intensely about how to animate a body but almost not at all about what the living being will need. He does not prepare a safe environment, seek advice, consider the creature’s education, or imagine its emotional dependence. The experiment is therefore irresponsible even before its outcome. Scientific ability answers the question of whether he can create life, but it does not answer whether he should proceed in this way or how he must respond afterward. (Mellor, 1988)

The Moment of Creation and Immediate Rejection

When the creature comes alive, Victor’s imagined triumph collapses into horror. He had selected features he considered beautiful, but the assembled body appears grotesque once animated. The creature’s watery eyes, yellow skin, black lips, and unnatural proportions repel him. Victor flees rather than observing, communicating, or providing care. His response is often treated as an understandable reaction to a monster, yet the creature has not committed any violent act. At that moment, it is confused, dependent, and reaching toward the person who made it. (Shelley, 2012)

Victor’s rejection resembles a failure of parenthood. He has deliberately brought a sentient being into

existence and then denies the relationship because the result does not match his fantasy. The creature later learns language, reads, reasons, admires human affection, and longs for companionship. These abilities confirm that Victor did not create a mindless evil. He created a being capable of moral development and abandoned it at the beginning of that development. (Shelley, 2012; Mellor, 1988)

The immediate result for Victor is nervous collapse. Henry Clerval nurses him for months, restoring him through friendship and care. This contrast is one of Shelley's sharpest moral judgments. Victor survives because another person accepts responsibility for him when he is helpless. The creature receives no equivalent protection. Victor benefits from the very compassion he refuses to offer. (Shelley, 2012)

Secrecy and the Growth of Guilt

After William Frankenstein is murdered, Victor recognizes the creature near the scene and concludes that it is responsible. Nevertheless, he remains silent while Justine Moritz is accused, convicted, and executed. He tells himself that his story would appear unbelievable, but fear of disbelief does not remove his responsibility to act. He could have challenged the evidence, disclosed part of what he knew, or tried to prevent the execution. Instead, secrecy protects his reputation while an innocent person suffers. (Shelley, 2012)

Victor's guilt deepens because he understands the connection between his actions and the deaths around him. He calls himself the true murderer, yet this recognition does not consistently produce moral courage. He experiences intense remorse privately while withholding information publicly. Shelley distinguishes feeling guilty from behaving responsibly. Victor's suffering is real, but suffering alone does not repair harm. (Shelley, 2012; Mellor, 1988)

Nature temporarily relieves him. Mountains, lakes, and storms interrupt his self-absorption and restore a sense of scale. These scenes show that Victor remains capable of emotional renewal. However, he repeatedly uses temporary relief as an escape rather than as preparation for action. The sublime landscape calms him, but it cannot make decisions on his behalf. (Shelley, 2012)

The Creature's Narrative and Victor's Partial Recognition

On the glacier, the creature confronts Victor and asks him to listen. His narrative reveals a gradual moral education. He learns language by observing the De Lacey family, assists them secretly, and hopes that kindness will win acceptance. Rejection by the family, violence from other humans, and continued isolation turn his longing into rage. His crimes remain his own responsibility, but the narrative shows how abandonment and social exclusion contribute to his development. (Shelley,

2012)

Victor briefly acknowledges an obligation. He agrees to create a female companion after the creature argues that companionship may allow both beings to withdraw from humanity. This is one of the few moments when Victor seriously considers the creature's perspective. Even then, his response is unstable. He works in secrecy again, isolates himself, and eventually destroys the unfinished companion while the creature watches. (Shelley, 2012)

There are reasons for Victor's fear. A second being might refuse the agreement, reproduce, or create further danger. The novel does not present the request as simple or risk-free. Victor's failure lies less in refusing than in the manner of his decision. He makes a promise, begins the work, destroys it impulsively, and offers no alternative. He repeats the pattern of acting alone on matters that affect others. His imagination moves immediately to catastrophic possibilities, but he does not seek counsel, negotiate conditions, or accept responsibility for the conflict he has intensified. (Shelley, 2012; Mellor, 1988)

From Remorse to Revenge

After Victor destroys the female creature, the original creature promises to be with him on his wedding night. Victor assumes that he himself is the intended victim and does not fully consider the danger to Elizabeth. This misunderstanding reveals the persistence of self-centered thinking. Even when he fears violence, he imagines the story revolving around his own death. Elizabeth is left vulnerable and is murdered. (Shelley, 2012)

The deaths of Clerval, Elizabeth, and Victor's father complete his social destruction. Victor loses the relationships that once connected him to ordinary life. At this stage, remorse gives way to revenge. He asks a magistrate for help, but when legal action appears impossible, he swears to pursue the creature himself. The chase carries him across Europe and into the Arctic, where the roles of hunter and hunted become difficult to separate. (Shelley, 2012)

Victor now resembles the being he condemns. Both are isolated, driven by grief, and willing to sacrifice their remaining lives to revenge. The creature leaves food and messages to keep Victor alive, not from mercy but to prolong the pursuit. Victor accepts the terms of this relationship because revenge gives him a purpose that responsibility no longer does. He no longer seeks to protect society through a carefully reasoned plan; he seeks personal completion through destruction. (Shelley, 2012; Mellor, 1988)

Victor's Final Self-Interpretation

Walton meets Victor near death and hears the story from his perspective. Victor acknowledges that ambition ruined him, but his final advice is inconsistent. At times, he warns Walton to seek happiness

in tranquility and avoid ambition. At other moments, he urges the crew to continue north despite danger and praises glory. This contradiction shows that Victor has learned something but not everything. He recognizes the cost of his obsession, yet the heroic ideal that fueled it still appeals to him. (Shelley, 2012)

His account also shapes the reader's response. Victor is eloquent and suffering, which can make his interpretation persuasive. However, the creature's narrative exposes omissions in Victor's story. Victor calls the being demonic without first explaining how completely he abandoned it. He presents the destruction of the female as a duty to humanity while giving less attention to his broken promise. Shelley's layered narration asks readers to compare testimony rather than accept one voice as final truth. (Shelley, 2012; Mellor, 1988)

The famous late speech in which Victor laments how far he has fallen is therefore both sincere and limited. He understands that his "high hopes" have ended in degradation. What he does not fully understand is that the fall began not with the creature's first crime but with his own refusal to care for the life he had made. His tragedy is not simply that knowledge became dangerous. It is that he separated knowledge from relationship and treated creation as a moment of achievement rather than the beginning of obligation. (Mellor, 1988)

Science, Responsibility, and the Meaning of the Transformation

Victor is often described as a warning against science, but the novel's argument is more precise. Shelley does not condemn curiosity, education, or experimentation in themselves. Walton's expedition, Clerval's studies, and the creature's learning all demonstrate different forms of inquiry. The novel criticizes knowledge pursued without accountability, emotional balance, or social consultation. (Mellor, 1988)

Victor's transformation can be traced through four stages. First, curiosity becomes ambition when he imagines exceptional power and recognition. Second, ambition becomes obsession when he sacrifices health and relationships to the experiment. Third, success becomes guilt when he rejects the creature and hides the consequences. Finally, guilt becomes revenge when he loses hope of repairing the harm and defines justice as the destruction of his creation. Each stage grows from choices made in the previous one. (Shelley, 2012; Mellor, 1988)

This sequence also explains why the novel remains relevant to debates about research ethics and technological innovation. A creator cannot evaluate a project only by asking whether it works. The likely users, risks, unequal effects, maintenance, misuse, and responsibilities after release must also be considered. Victor's greatest mistake is not that he fails to predict every consequence. No researcher can do that. His mistake is that he refuses to remain present when consequences appear. (Mellor, 1988)

Conclusion

Victor Frankenstein changes from a hopeful student into an exhausted pursuer of revenge, but the transformation is neither immediate nor inevitable. It begins when intellectual ambition isolates him from family and ordinary moral judgment. It accelerates when he abandons the creature, protects his secret while innocent people suffer, and repeatedly makes decisions without consultation. By the end, grief and guilt have narrowed his identity until vengeance is the only purpose he can recognize. (Shelley, 2012)

The novel is tragic because Victor possesses intelligence, affection, and moments of insight, yet fails to convert them into sustained responsibility. His warning about ambition is valuable, but incomplete. The deeper warning is about creation without care. Shelley presents knowledge as powerful and potentially beneficial, while insisting that power creates obligations. Victor's physical decline and despair are the final consequences of a character who wanted the glory of giving life but rejected the difficult human work of answering for it. (Mellor, 1988)

References

Mellor, A. K. (1988). *Mary Shelley: Her life, her fiction, her monsters*. Methuen.

Shelley, M. (2012). *Frankenstein; or, The modern Prometheus: The 1818 text* (M. K. Joseph, Ed.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1818).

Shelley, M. (2003). *Frankenstein, or The modern Prometheus*. New American Library.