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# The creature in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: Sublime work of art or doomed child of science?

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**THE CREATURE IN MARY SHELLEY'S  
*FRANKENSTEIN*: SUBLIME WORK OF  
ART OR DOOMED CHILD OF SCIENCE?**

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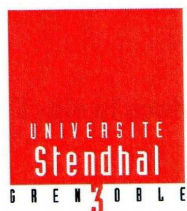
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## INTRODUCTION

*Frankenstein or; the Modern Prometheus* was written by Mary Shelley in 1818. It was written after a nightmare that the author had, just before a ghost-story writing contest. It starts with the letters written by Robert Walton to his sister, telling the story of his travel during the expedition to the North Pole. One day he hosts a man that he finds stuck in the ice. The latter will narrate his travel. This man is Victor Frankenstein, a brilliant scientist. Throughout the novel, the reader will know the stages which lead him to discover the secret of eternal life and the causes and consequences of his determination. During a dark autumn evening, he brought to life a creature which he abandoned because of his disappointment, notably because of his ugliness...

Joseph Addison, an English statesman, poet and writer, visited the Alps and wrote “The Alps [...] fill the mind with an agreeable kind of horror”.<sup>1</sup> With this oxymoron he was one of the first to define the sublime for its aesthetics of greatness. Ugliness clearly possesses an aesthetic potential. One of the aims of this dissertation will be to attempt to give an account of the notion of the sublime and the beautiful and their relation to the arts; literature (illustrated by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*) and painting (with references to Caspar David Friedrich and Fuseli).

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Addison, *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* (New-York: Harper & Brothers, 1837), accessed October 21, 2012, <http://books.google.fr/books?id=F6U3AAAAIAAJ>, 374.



In the eighteenth century, artists started to be seen as people who spontaneously created beautiful things, and this idea allowed the development of the notion of liberty in the arts which led to the birth of the Romantic Movement. This movement corresponds to the late eighteenth century, which was an eventful period: in 1775 the American Revolution, one year later, the American Declaration of Independence, in 1789 the French Revolution, and the following year the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. This was a very hectic context and the notion of liberty pervaded every aspect of American as well as British society. The artists of the time were very much influenced by this atmosphere and took part in the political debate. While the narrow-minded repressed natural feelings as something immoral, shaping a hypocritical society full of anxiety, the Romantics extolled the value of Nature, they expressed in their art the desire to abandon themselves to nature and emotion. The sublime exemplifies this desire to meet the limits of bodily and perceptual experience. The Romantics thus undertook to represent such sublime landscapes like mountains and oceans which would have been considered as forbidding by early eighteenth century's aestheticians.

Edmund Burke was born in 1729. He was an Irish philosopher, a political theorist and a British statesman. He started his political career as a leader of the Whig Party. He later began to develop conservative views because of the French revolution. From the second half of the 1750's he expressed his dislike of the Enlightenment as well as his strong opposition to the French Revolution.

In 1757 he wrote *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*; defining the sublime as “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”<sup>2</sup>

Adam Phillips, the author of the preface, explains Burke's approach: “For Burke and Kant the sublime was a way of thinking about excess as the key to a new kind of subjectivity.”<sup>3</sup>

Ambition was a key element in Burke's life. “For Burke, throughout his life, ambition would be bound up with speculation in several senses.”<sup>4</sup> The author also sheds light on the reasons and motivations that led the philosopher to write this essay: “The nature of the passions and the idea of the sublime were suitably fashionable and grandiose subjects for a young man trying to find a place in literary London in the 1750's.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed there was a rise of modern tastes in opposition to the style of the elders, which ranked the pursuit of pleasure before everything. This pleasure was a sophisticated one and was appropriated by the Elite.

The Enquiry attempted to introduce new standards of taste in the context of Enlightenment.

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2 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (United states of America: Oxford University Press, 1990), 37.

3 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, ix.

4 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, x.

5 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, x.

Burke's strong interest in oppositions and contradictions is reflected in his analysis of both beauty and terror. "The sublime is a rape, beauty is a lure."<sup>6</sup>

This dissertation will attempt to focus on Mary Shelley's creature: should it be considered a work of art or a doomed child of science? On the one hand, quoting from Edmund Burke's essay on the sublime *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, it will confront this notion to the beautiful and will tackle the question of aesthetic judgement. On the other hand, the domain of pathology will be explored, evoking the question of the norm and the place of the creature in society. Finally, the notion of progress will be tackled, with an accent put on the particularly hectic context of nineteenth-century Britain. The concepts of the Sublime and the Beautiful will be studied in their relation to the arts – mostly in literature but also in painting with references to Friedrich, Fuseli or Turner.

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<sup>6</sup> Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, xxi.

## **Part 1**

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## **DEFORMITY**

## Chapter 1 – Sublime Humanity

The origins of the word “sublime” date back to 1350; “from the Latin *sublīmis* meaning high, equivalent to sub- added to an element of uncertain origin, variously identified with *līmis*, *līmus* meaning oblique or *līmen* meaning threshold.”<sup>7</sup>

### The Natural Sublime – the Numinous

During the seventeenth century, thanks to many investigations on the field of psychology, a new dimension was apprehended. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) criticized the science of his time and advocated an empirical approach. Nominalism also tackled the question, in reality, of the essence of a concept as a whole, only existing in a mental dimension, in opposition to the existence of particularities. The reversal operates on another level; humans create concepts, it is not God who creates essences. Francis Bacon implied the idea that Man governs natural elements, which enables the development of science and modern technology.

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<sup>7</sup> *Word Dynamo*, accessed October 27, 2012. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sublime>.

Humanism culturally breaks from medieval tradition. Indeed, it is the rise of the universal and of an individualistic Man, who is curious, adventurous and searching for scientific truth.

Victor Frankenstein perfectly embodies this depiction.

Concerning art, the Renaissance found its roots in thirteenth century Italy then extended beyond. Bodily perfection reached through body care became an ideal.

The word “sacred”, from the Latin *sancire* meaning to distinguish, to define, designates what is separated and limited. On the contrary, the profane is what is literally “outside the temple” (*pro – fanum*), what is non-religious. The opposition is interesting if we consider that if what is profane reflects the fact that man can think and act according to his own law, what is sacred consequently refers to the supernatural, the mysterious and the transcendent. The term “numinous” comes from *Numen*, meaning Divinity in Latin. What is numinous is what results from both feelings of awe and fascination. As a protection from terror, the profane will pray, make sacrifices and offerings. The profane feels unclean, unworthy to touch the sacred which he would defile. The profane being strives to be possessed by the numinous. Thomas Weiskel discusses the development of the sublime in *The Romantic Sublime*:

The first development, in the seventeenth century, was the identification of the Deity’s traditional attributes, – infinity, immensity, coexistence – with the vastness of space newly discovered by an emergent astronomy. The emotions traditionally religious were displaced from the Deity and became associated first with the immensity of space and secondarily with the natural phenomena (oceans, mountains) which seemed to approach that

immensity. Soon the numinous was diffused through all the grander aspects of nature.<sup>8</sup>

### **Emotion and Aesthetics**

Moreover, Nature can be apprehended either emotionally or aesthetically. Through the contemplation of the colours, the shapes and the harmonies, and in the case of the sublime, the vastness or the wilderness, man wants to depict it. According to the different eras and trends, Nature can be depicted with sensitivity, with realism or as a symbol. For the Romantics, its complexity and its vastness is a proof of God's existence. Wordsworth, a revolutionary artist, had a Pantheistic conception of nature. Samuel Taylor Coleridge is from the second generation of Romantics. He wrote a book with Wordsworth entitled *The Lyrical Ballads*. He was attracted by the mysterious, the supernatural and the irrational.

*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is about a boat leaving England to the North Pole. While it is stuck in ice, an albatross appears and the crew feeds it. However, a mariner shoots it and it falls on the deck. The albatross' omen: the sun comes after its death. Everybody dies except the mariner. He is punished and has to live in extreme suffering. The "suspension of disbelief" adds a human interest to this fantastic narrative. The ballad bears some Gothic similarities with Mary Shelley's novel.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*, (United States of America: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Françoise Grellet and Marie-Hélène Valentin, *An Introduction to English Literature, from Philip Sidney to Graham Swift*, Paris: Hachette Livre, 2000) 184-186.

John Keats has another vision of the sublime and of beauty.

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty”, - that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

The use of drugs was also part of the Romantic Movement. Thomas de Quincey experienced the effects of opium on his perceptual senses and reported his impressions in his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. He evokes the “sublime cluster of mountain group” and the vastness of English lakes.<sup>10</sup>

Nature is obviously an important element in Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The key moments are illustrated by the presence of nature: “A flash of lightning illuminating the object, and discovered its shape plainly to me, its gigantic stature and the deformity of its aspect more hideous than belongs to humanity, instantly informed me that it was the wretch, the filthy daemon, to whom I had given life”<sup>11</sup>. Or, in chapter six of volume three, when Elizabeth dies, “Suddenly a heavy storm of rain descended.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Victor goes to the mountains to appease his mind: “I was troubled [...] but I was quickly restored by the cold gale of the mountains”. It is also true for the creature: “the desert mountains and dreary glaciers are my refuge.”<sup>13</sup> Mary Shelley emphasises the power of nature in the novel.

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10 Thomas de Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, books.google.fr/books?id=zE40QAAMAAJ, 71.

11 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, The modern Prometheus*, London: Penguin, 1992, 77.

12 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 198.

13 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 103.



Furthermore, spring and nature's awakening are soothing to the monster:

The pleasant showers and genial warmth of spring greatly altered the aspect of the earth [...] the birds sang in more cheerful notes [...] happy, happy earth! [...] my spirits were elevated by the enchanting appearance of nature [...] the future gilded by bright rays of hope and anticipations of joy.<sup>14</sup>

The following aspect that is going to be dealt with is more novelistic and deals significantly with the Gothic genre. Indeed, obscurity is the main atmosphere of the novel: "It was on a dreary night of November", "my candle was nearly burnt out [...] half extinguished light."<sup>15</sup> According to Edmund Burke, "to make things very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary, [...] night adds to our dread."<sup>16</sup> He argues that obscurity increases the danger and tantalizes the imagination. This is further suggested in Shelley's novel: "It had been calm during the day, but as soon as night obscured the shape of objects, a thousand fears arose in my mind." The environment is blurred and so is the mind of the subject immersed in darkness. Knowledge takes part in fear, as what one knows is more secure. Therefore, all the landmarks disappear as the light vanishes.

Moreover, the weather also creates a mysterious atmosphere: "the rain pattered dismally against the panes", "Our situation was somewhat dangerous, especially as we were compassed round by a very thick fog." The fact that the places mentioned like Switzerland, Germany and The North Pole are for the most part unknown to the reader at the time adds an

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14 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 142-190.

15 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 58.

16 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 54.

uncanny feeling of disorientation. As discussed earlier, the unknown raises fear and troubles the mind. Light is also important as it brings a specific atmosphere. A feeble light on an object can produce a sublime effect, as well as the light of the sun, which is powerful and affects the mind. Light strategically show things and decides to hide others. It is also linked to a divine presence. Then, a powerful source of light can be blinding, eventually referring to darkness.<sup>17</sup>

Among colours, such as are soft or cheerful, are unfit to produce grand image. An immense mountain covered with a shining green turf, is nothing in this respect, to one dark and gloomy; the cloudy sky is more grand than the blue, and night is more sublime and more solemn than day.<sup>18</sup>

Light influences the colours but, according to Burke, they do not contribute to the sublime as darkness does.

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<sup>17</sup> Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 74.

<sup>18</sup> Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 75.

## Chapter 2 – Sex and Genre

### Victorian Women's Conditions

Until the end of the nineteenth century women were deprived of fundamental rights: social, political rights as well as education and property. They were completely dependent; first, on their father and brother and later on their husband. Women were subordinated to men, patriarchal authority prevailed until World War One. They were the victims of social and economic inequalities. Great Britain was puritan during the seventeenth century, (with the reform; Luther, Calvin, and Cromwell) and it had an impact on society and culture, creating an atmosphere of silence and submission. Man had authority and knowledge, and silence was a recurrent theme in literature. The nineteenth century women fell into two categories: Coventry Patmore, an English poet wrote in 1854 *The Angel in the House* opposing the angel in the house to the fallen woman. Women were supposed to comfort their husband. They were responsible for their husband's violence. Women were considered as housekeepers. They could speak but only to entertain. At the time women were men's moral guides. Mary Shelley worked on her novel during the whole year 1816. The manuscript was rejected twice before being published in 1818. One can wonder if it was acceptable for such a young girl to write a story like this. Although she was the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, an advocate of

women's rights and the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Shelley yet does not give to women important roles or power in her novel. Indeed, the feminine characters are rather passive and suffer from injustice, notably when Justine is accused of murder while being innocent. They are weak and powerless which is a feature of the Gothic genre; Elizabeth is eventually killed by the creature, and men have the monopoly. For example Victor holds Justine's fate between his hands and has the power to make it change. Moreover, he refuses to create a female monster and partner for the creature. Edmund Burke described the woman as being a fury like the worst monsters of the revolutionary era:

The Furies [...] as in whilst the royal captives who followed in the train were slowly moved along, amidst the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell in the abused shape of the vilest of women, [...] a spectacle more resembling a procession of American savages [...] overpowered with the scoffs and buffets of women as ferocious as themselves.<sup>19</sup>

However, despite the weak role of women in the novel, this lays emphasis even more on the cruelty of men, with their obsession for control and power.

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<sup>19</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Bartelby.com accessed October 27, 2012 <http://www.bartleby.com/24/3/5.html>.

## Sexuality

Female sexuality as well as female desire was denied in the nineteenth century, except for the Bronte sisters who evoked love and passion. The consequence of the nineteenth century dichotomy was the fear of female desire and female sexuality. It was considered dangerous because it involved a power that was threatening to men's social power. It was part of a wish for patriarchy to silence women and to repress their desire. They embodied the repressed desires of society, were considered dangerous, if not insane. Women were also considered hysterical. What is interesting in Shelley's novel is the fact that, despite the overall discreet role of women, hysteria, a typically feminine trait for the time, is attributed to Victor Frankenstein. He suffers from fury several times. This is in a way de-constructing gender by way of a transgression of its boundaries. Victor's fears and passions are highlighted in order to break with the stereotypical association of his feelings to women. He also gave birth which provides him a woman's status. Metaphorically, Victor decided to abandon his child. However, the repression of his feelings will prove to be both dangerous and uncontrollable.

## Chapter 3 – Roles of Taste

### In the Arts

Taste is the means by which a person can seize the beauty of a work of art. It is based on the idea of harmony, taking its roots during the Classical period. The trend suggests that the Beautiful moves and touches. The Romantics say that what touches then is beautiful. One can wonder whether taste is linked to sensitivity. It is through an artistic creation that a work of art touches, and not only according to emotion. One does not judge only after pure emotion but also from aesthetic admiration. *The rules* are the principles according to which a work of art can reach beauty. Classic rules date back to Aristotle, and originate from reason and consciousness of the means allowing to reach beauty. Truth is sensible to the public only thanks to a stylisation realised by the rules. Morality has to be respected, verisimilitude, the rules of polite society and unity (which vary according to the genre, either epic or drama etc.) These principles correspond to a need for an idealisation of a perfect reality, a perfect truth to arouse pleasure. However, they can be overhauled to reach beauty.

In the fifth chapter of *Frankenstein*, the lexical field of physicality is deeply present, underlining the monster's ugliness: “horrid”, “the beauty of the dream had vanished”, “horror”, the light is “dim and 'yellow'” “[...] so hideous as that wretch”, “he was ugly”,

“dismal”<sup>20</sup> ... This is also true in chapter thirteen, with the description of the beauty of spring: “the most beautiful flowers [...] thousand scents of delight and thousand signs of beauty” in contrast to the “desert and gloomy”.

I beheld a countenance of angelic beauty and expression. Her hair of a shining raven black, and curiously braided; her eyes were dark, but gentle, although animated; her features of a regular proportion, and her complexion wondrously fair, each cheek tinged with a lovely pink.<sup>21</sup>

The sublime is linked to inaccessibility, and the birth of the creature transcends the limits of inaccessibility, in parallel with the notion of God and of creation. There is a contrast between the beauty in each part of the creature and the ugliness of the result when Victor cries out: “His limbs were in proportion, and had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! - Great God!”<sup>22</sup> This overthrows the objectiveness of the beautiful.

### **The Question of Judgement**

Indeed, Immanuel Kant based the judgement of the beautiful first on intuition. The object affects the mind, this is what he called sensibility. “That sort of intuition which relates

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20 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 58-59.

21 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 137.

22 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 58.

to an object by means of sensation is called empirical intuition.”<sup>23</sup> Victor Frankenstein thought that if he could carefully pick beautiful limbs the creature would be beautiful. This Gothic element disrupts the experience of reason on the beautiful. Alexander Gerard's *Essay on Taste* of 1759 refers to proportion as the basis of beauty and more precisely to 'fitness'. “A very small disproportion in any of the members of the human body produces deformity.”<sup>24</sup> This can be extended to art: “The least deviation, in the production of the fine arts, from the natural harmony of the parts, always occasions a blemish.”<sup>25</sup> To justify this analysis, we have the proof in chapter seven of volume two that the only person who shows compassion towards the creature is the character of old DeLacey who is blind. The creature seizes the opportunity when the whole family leaves the cottage except him and comes knocking at his door: “I had sagacity enough to discover that the unnatural hideousness of my person was the chief object of horror with those who had formerly beheld me.”<sup>26</sup> However, the family comes back and sees the creature, which is immediately beaten by Felix. At the end of the novel, it becomes aware that the world in which it lives is wrong and unfair:

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23 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (Digireads.com, 2005), accessed September 27, 2012, <http://books.google.fr/books?isbn=142092690X>, 31.

24 Alexander Gerard, *An essay on Taste*, accessed October 29, 2012, <http://books.google.fr/books?id=ILOPAAAAQAAJ>, 34.

25 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgement*, (Cambridge University Press, 2000), accessed October 29, 2012, <http://books.google.fr/books?isbn=0521348927>, 34.

26 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 134.



Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all humankind sinned against me? Why do you not hate Felix, who drove his friend from his door with contumely? Why do you not execrate the rustic who sought to destroy the saviour of his child? Nay, these are virtuous and immaculate beings! I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on. Even now my blood boils at the recollection of this injustice.<sup>27</sup>

In this passage one clearly sees that the creature has a role of victim despite the bad actions it could have done. The reader feels compassion for it as it has mitigating circumstances. First it has been abandoned, second he has been mistreated by human beings he encountered, because of his ugliness. Physical appearance here is linked to morality, the creature is judged evil as it inspires horror. Eighteenth century philosophy considered that human beings had an inner sense of beauty. Francis Hutcheson, an Irish philosopher, published *Inquiry concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony and Design* in 1726. His main idea was that human beings were all endowed with a special inner sense perceiving beauty, proportion and harmony, in opposition with the external senses. This inner sense makes us able to perceive the beauty of general truths as well as moral principles and actions. There is a kind of analogy between beauty and virtue.<sup>28</sup> This is linked to the creature's rejection. David Hume also agreed. In *Of the Standard of Taste* published in 1757, he stated that if people universally appreciate such works as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* consequently share common standards of taste. This implies that

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27 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 224.

28 Francis Hutcheson, *An inquiry concerning beauty, order, harmony, design* in *Contemplating Music: Source Readings in the Aesthetics of Music*, (New-York: Pendragon Press, 1989), accessed October 29, 2012, <http://books.google.fr/books?isbn=0918728681>, 530-540.

human beings naturally know what is beautiful and what is not.<sup>29</sup> Kant's attempt to define the sublime is quite different; in *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), he stated that emotions are used as substitutes for reason, which is called passion. The sublime limits the development of reason, it anticipates it. However, there is a distinction between the sublime and the beautiful; the latest notion implies an abstract reliance on reason to create pleasure whereas the sublime derives from concrete experience of astonishment and horror.<sup>30</sup> What is beautiful inspires confidence, and what is not inspires fear. The creature's ugliness causes people to be wary as they think it is aggressive.

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29 David Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste* in *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*. Accessed October 30, 2012, <http://books.google.fr/books?id=iF0uAAAAYAAJ>, 267.

30 Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*.

## **Part 2**

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## **THE ORGANIC SUBLIME**

## **Chapter 4 – Illness and Pathology**

Not only did Man take control over nature thanks to progress, but he also won a victory against pain. Indeed, an anaesthetic liquid called chloroform was used for medical purposes, making people unconscious. It established a new relation between the patient and the doctor. It was called the “liquid of the devil” by religious and superstitious people. The theme of illness is recurrent in the novel. Frankenstein's obsession is not only to fight it but to win against death. The reason may be that many people dear to him succumbed to severe diseases. Moreover, Victor falls ill after some tragic events of his life – after Clerval's death for example, or Elizabeth's. Culpability also eats him away. If he had not created the monster William, his brother, would not have been murdered.

### **Somatisation**

Following the argument in which Victor was attributed feminine qualities, one could associate his behaviour to hysteria and postnatal depression. Indeed, this is on the one hand provoked by a feeling of guilt. Victor did not assume his creation and thus was incapable to take care of it. He brought a creature to life and abandoned it. When the monster meets its

creator, the latter realises that he was responsible for it, for its deeds and its well-being. Victor, blinded by his ambition, did not measure the hugeness of his action in terms of responsibility.

Section II of the second part of Burke's essay focuses on terror; "Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror, be endued with greatness of dimension or not; for it is impossible to look on any thing as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous."<sup>31</sup> Burke makes a link between the body and the mind, underlining the physical effects that pain and terror involve:

The only difference between pain and terror, is, that things which cause pain operate on the mind, by the intervention of the body; whereas things that cause terror generally affect the bodily organs by the operation of the mind suggesting the danger [...] producing a tension, contraction, or violent emotion of the nerves [...] then, when the body is disposed [...] to such emotions as it would acquire by the means of a certain passion; it will itself excite something very like that passion in the mind.<sup>32</sup>

In chapter two of Shelley's novel, Frankenstein's ambition and his thirst for knowledge are described. However, there is a glimpse of the tragic events that will follow, and all the pain that it will involve: "the raising of ghosts or devils was a promise liberally accorded by my favourite authors", "destiny was too potent, and her immutable laws had decreed my utter and terrible destruction."<sup>33</sup> This is visible when Elisabeth dies: "the whole truth rushed into my mind, my arms dropped, the motion of every muscle and fibre was suspended, I could feel the

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31 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 53.

32 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 53.

33 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 43.

blood trickling in my veins and tingling in the extremities of my limbs.”<sup>34</sup> with a very precise depiction of the anatomy. At this stage, Frankenstein is not sure about Elizabeth's death yet. Once it is confirmed that she is dead, Frankenstein falls physically sick, partly because he realizes that all these events were originally generated by himself: “in the agony of despair”, “I felt a kind of panic” “my steps were like those of a drunken man [...] and my skin was parched with the heat of fever”.<sup>35</sup> Mary Shelley depicts the effects of horror and pain both on mind and body, and links psychological torment to physical suffering.

This is equally true in chapter five of volume one, first with Frankenstein's reaction when the creature comes to life as already discussed, but also with the nightmare, which clearly predicts Elizabeth's tragic fate: “I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth shattered, and every limb became convulsed...”<sup>36</sup> The dream could be defined as a mental activity unsubsued to the will which happens during our sleep. In the Antiquity, it was considered as a message sent from God . In the nineteenth century with Freud, dreams were scientifically studied and presented as the realisation of a desire by an individual.

### **Symptoms of Freudian interpretation**

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34 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 199.

35 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 200.

36 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 59.

Freud divided the human psyche into three parts: Id, ego and super-ego.

For Freud, a stimulation is something brought to the living tissue from the outside. The reflex is an action unloaded toward the outside as a reaction. Then in opposition there is the impulse which comes from the inside. Freud opposes the physiological, which is related to the function of the organs and the tissues [*physis* meaning ‘nature’ and *logos* meaning ‘study’] to the psychological, [*psukhê* meaning ‘soul’] linked to mental functions such as thought, emotions, conscience and behaviours.

Victor’s pathology could be defined as pathological narcissism. In Greek mythology, Narcissus (*narkê* meaning “sleep” in ancient Greek) was a man of an extreme beauty but he was also very proud as he spurned a lot of his suitors. The nymph Echo, who was in love with him, threw a curse on him. One day, as he was drinking from a spring, he saw his reflection in the water and fell in love with it. He stayed long days gazing at himself, desperate not to be able to catch his own image. He ended up fading away and then dying because of a passion he was unable to quench. Victor is selfish and egotistical. The etymology, again, is important to mention as it comes from the Latin *ego* meaning ‘I’ or ‘me’. It is the fact of bringing everything back to oneself. The following example is relevant:

[...] when I found so astonishing a power placed within my hands...I possessed the capacity of bestowing animation.<sup>37</sup>

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37 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 54.

Victor Frankenstein has a high opinion of himself, which is especially demonstrated by his excessive ambition. Then again, he seems alienated by discovery: “I ardently desired the acquisition of knowledge.” His urges are so powerful that he seeks solitude: “I believe myself totally unfitted for the company of strangers”, “my solitary apartment”<sup>38</sup>. This proves that he is turned toward himself.

My application [...] soon became ardent and eager, that the stars often disappeared in the light of morning whilst I was yet engaged in my laboratory. [...] I was engaged, heart and soul, in the pursuit of some discoveries which I hoped to make.<sup>39</sup>

He is so absorbed by his studies that in two years he did not visit his family in Switzerland. Victor is a brilliant student and admits that he is superior to his comrades. He thinks his thirst for discovery places him upon others. He even receives “great esteem and admiration” from everybody. Also, he declares: “among so many men of genius who had directed their enquiries towards the same science, I alone should be reserved to discover so astonishing a secret.” Phrases such as “I succeeded”; “I became myself capable” also show his self-absorption. He is equally close to Narcissus as he little by little excluded himself from the rest of the world, his room becomes a “solitary chamber, or rather [a] cell”, symbolising his exclusion. Moreover, his physical appearance is also deteriorating: “my cheek had grown pale with study and my person had become emaciated with confinement”; “my eyeballs were

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38 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 46.

39 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 51.



starting from their socket”.<sup>40</sup> This foreshadows the description of the monster made in chapter five of book one, justifying in a way the link between the creator and his creature. The exaggeration and hyperboles also show the immoderate character of Victor: “summit of my desires”, “the most gratifying consummation of my toils”; “the discovery was so great and overwhelming”; “what had been the study and desire of the wisest men since the creation was now within my grasp.”; “a magic scene.”<sup>41</sup>

Narcissism is a phase constituting the beginning of a phase of development of the ego where sexual impulses find an auto-erotic satisfaction. For the narcissist, the external world has no interest contrary to the ego which is pleasing. The relationship between the ego and reality resides in the fact that the outside world is composed of a part of pleasure. The rest is alien. The ego has extracted a part of it to project it in this outside world, which is hostile. This could be illustrated by Victor as the subject extracting a part of him, his creature. Freud states that to escape an impulse is impossible as it comes from the ego. It requires an action to be eliminated. What is interesting is that there is a kind of impulse having reproduction as an end. Victor could have felt an impulse of self-conservation. Frankenstein’s impulse was revealed to himself after a lecture given by M. Waldman.

Such were the professor’s words – rather let me say such the words of the fate – enounced to destroy me. As I went on I felt as if my soul were grappling with a palpable enemy; one by one the various keys were touched which formed the mechanism of my being: chord after

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40 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 55.

41 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 53-54.

chord was sounded, and soon my mind was filled with one thought, one conception, one purpose. So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of Frankenstein, - more, far more, will I achieve: treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation.<sup>42</sup>

This ambition is depicted as an evidence “to devote myself to a science for which I believed myself to possess a natural talent”. The impulse in itself is depicted as a kind of possession of Frankenstein’s body: “a resistless, a frantic impulse, urged forward me; I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but the one of pursuit. It was indeed but a passing trance...”<sup>43</sup> The meaning of the words “frantic” and “trance” are important to underline as they both imply to be out of oneself. It could be compared to a ritual of a psychological state in which the soul of the subject seem to leave his body. After the narcissist phase comes the “object phase” according to Freud. Either it produces a source of pleasure, a motive power tending to get the object closer to the subject; or a source of unhappiness, provoking the flight from the object, leading to repulsion, hatred, aggression or destruction of it. The second case applies to Victor as he feels disgust for his creature. Victor displays sadism which is defined by Freud as the demonstration of violence and power toward the object. Then, these impulses have several kinds of destiny. First, the “content reversal” when love becomes hatred. The second one is the turn around on one’s person , which is called masochism, that is to say sadism turned on the self-ego.<sup>44</sup> After Victor abandons his “object” because he is unable to look at it, there is a reversal of the impulse of watching, of being active, now re-oriented on a part of his own

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42 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 49.

43 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 55.

44 Sigmund Freud, *Métopsychoanalyse*, (Gallimard, 2010), 11-43.

body. The scientist's narcissist impulse of creation had turned over himself, and the voyeurism has become passive; the subject has failed to create something pleasant, at his image, to look at. His disappointment clearly shows the failure of the destiny of his narcissist impulse to create something beautiful, and more than that, a human being. Hatred comes from frustration, indeed, not only the creature is not beautiful enough for its creator, but it does not look like a "normal" human being. Hatred could also represent the ego's struggle for conservation. Moreover, it can also be defined as the essential refusal of the narcissist ego to face the outside world. Sublimation, for Freud, is the handling of the impulse which diverts it from its sexual end in order to invest it into non-sexual objects, culturally and socially promoted.<sup>45</sup>

The German for "sublimation" is "*sublimierung*". If one looks for the substantive, *verdrängung*, one finds out that the term means "displacement" or "repression" in psychoanalytical terms.<sup>46</sup> Frankenstein's production, the creature, should be seen as a work of art, which is supposed to be beautiful. The word "art" can refer to the technique, and like science, has truth as an end. Frankenstein's art aimed at reproducing the real, like science does. Both terms encapsulate a notion of beauty and require a certain amount of objectivity. To create life, Victor had to methodically follow the anatomy of a human being. He had to reproduce what exists in nature, although he wanted to create a superior being. His impulse

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45 Sigmund Freud, *Trois Essais sur la Théorie Sexuelle*. Gallimard: Paris 2011, 57-72.

46 Sublimation et conflit, consulted November 18, 2012. <http://www.leconflit.com/categorie-10446109.html>.

may have resulted from his loneliness, his desire to accomplish a work, orchestrated by his oversized ego. On another scale, Mary Shelley's art makes the reader think; it arouses the imagination, raises the question thanks to the environment she has created. Victor violates the laws of nature as he is not a scientist any more but a creator. He will pay for his excess of ambition as his creature will be a threat for the human race. He is governed by the id.

Nicole Berry in *Mary Shelley: Du Monstre au Sublime* talks about a blind passion ("passion aveugle"). Frankenstein realises what he has done as if he were waking up from a nightmare, finally confronted to the "reality of his desire".

The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation,; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream had vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart.<sup>47</sup>

She talks about a "fantasy of violence", which she links with his scientific instruments. He succeeds in transcending woman and himself.<sup>48</sup>

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47 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 58.

48 Nicole Berry, *Mary Shelley, Du monstre au Sublime*, (Switzerland: l'Age de l'Homme, 1997), 91-92.

## Chapter 5 – Norm and Normality

### The Creature's Pathology

Sickness is not only imbalance or disharmony, it may also be an effort of nature manifested in man to obtain a new balance. The creature's pathology seems to be contagious and it seemed to have contracted it because of the people surrounding it. Man creates his own pathologies.

“La norme c’est la forme d’écart que la sélection naturelle maintient.”<sup>49</sup>

Le concept de norme est un concept original qui ne se laisse pas [...] réduire à un concept objectivement déterminable par des méthodes scientifiques. Il n’y a donc pas, à proprement parler, de science biologique du normal. Il y a une science des situations et des conditions biologiques dites normales. Cette science est la physiologie. L’attribution aux constantes, dont la physiologie détermine scientifiquement le contenu, d’une valeur de “normal” traduit la relation de la science de la vie à l’activité normative de la vie et, en ce qui concerne la science de la vie humaine, aux techniques biologiques de production et d’instauration du normal, plus spécialement à la médecine.<sup>50</sup>

The abnormal does not only exist through an absence of normality. The creature is sickened by its own appearance: “I was, besides, endued with with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man.”<sup>51</sup> In the original sense of the term, the “grotesque” implies something ridiculous due to the fact that it is fake, distorted, extravagant or else bizarre. It sweeps aside the fluidity of life to make it rigid, mechanical, empty producing a comic relief. By contrast, the Romantics claim that, combined to the sublime, it

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49 Georges Canguilhem, *Le Normal et le Pathologique*, (Paris: PUF, 1988), 197.

50 Canguilhem, *Le Normal et le Pathologique*, 156.

51 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 123.

makes reality. It is an element of the Romantic tragedy. As life mixes the sublime to the grotesque, art which aims at reproducing life must combine both. A work of art that would display only beauty, harmony and idealism, therefore amputated from the grotesque would be incomplete. This also results from the Romantic taste for contrast. The grotesque, for Rabelais, aims at showing the absurdity of society that is to say, to reverse it. In chapter five for example, Frankenstein's nightmare about Elizabeth's death is an example of a nightmarish grotesque scene:

I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health [...] Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of flannel.<sup>52</sup>

This passage arouses pity and reveals the grotesque character of destiny. It is the illustration of Frankenstein's murder on the person of Elizabeth, which will happen later in the novel.

### **On Dehumanization**

The creature is obviously dehumanized throughout the novel, first it is referred to as “it”, a pronoun generally used for the inanimate in English, and it is also designated as “the wretch”, and “the fiend”, which creates an evil connotation. However, the word “monster” has

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<sup>52</sup>Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 59.

the following definitions: “a large, ugly, and frightening imaginary creature”, or “an animal, a plant, or other organism having structural defects or deformities”; In the field of pathology it is defined as: “a foetus or an infant that is grotesquely abnormal and usually not viable”; “A very large animal, plant, or object” or finally: “One who inspires horror or disgust.”<sup>53</sup>

In each case, the definition applies to the creature of the book, even the reference to the infant, since the reader witnesses its birth in chapter five. The word comes from the Latin *monstrum* “monster, monstrosity, omen, portent, sign”, from the root of *monere* which means "to warn". This indicates an external sign of the appearance which warns us that the “object” or the person is to be feared. It carries a morally negative image. The fact that it is going to be rejected will raise in it monstrous feelings, as referred earlier combined with the creature's inner sense of innocence. And the creature is constantly aware of this injustice. The real monster is Victor Frankenstein. There are several examples of his cruelty. He knows Justine is still innocent and lets her to be sentenced.

According to Burke, pain produces a stronger effect than pleasure does, it has a superior power. To free oneself from terror, a greater amount of power is thus necessary. It is different for pleasure which is spontaneous and does not require an effort. The role of the will creates the difference as one does not wish voluntarily to feel pain. If one takes the example of Victor’s creature, one can observe in the beginning that it is innocent and peaceful, and even

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53 Oxford Dictionary, accessed November 8, 2012, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/>.

pathetic, yet strong. After the pain it has suffered because of the people surrounding it, it becomes aggressive, even destructive and starts to use its latent strength:

Have I not suffered enough, that you seek to increase my misery? Life, although it may only be an accumulation on anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it. Remember, thou hast made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine, my joints more supple. [...] Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow creatures, who owe me nothing? They spur and hate me.<sup>54</sup>

The sublime arises when the spectator of this change, helpless, perceives the switch from an extreme to the other, as if that power had damaged the situation. The previous example was based on Burke's analysis of the ox, the horse, the lion, and the panther or the rhinoceros:

Whenever strength is only useful, and employed for our benefit or our pleasure, then it is never sublime; for nothing can act agreeably to us, that does not act in conformity to our will; but to act to our will, it must be subject to us; and therefore can never be the cause of a grand and commending conception.<sup>55</sup>

As the monster is rejected for no legitimate reasons, it creates a discrepancy for the spectators of its wrath, as the other people cannot understand its source. From there springs a powerful creature who is in a mad rage, and people play the role of victims although they are the cause of this behaviour. The creature cannot be compared to an animal as it has no fellow creatures.

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54 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 102-103.

55 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 61.



## Chapter 6 – Society

### The Outcast

Percy Shelley's influence is important to underline. Indeed, he was an English Romantic poet, and Mary Shelley married him in 1816. He wrote the preface to the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein*. In the novel, there are features of Romanticism, for example the figure of the outcast, Victor, misunderstood by the society in which he lives and isolated, the tragic figure of the creature rebelling against his creator, or even the importance and the presence of nature. There is a link between Victor and his creature; Victor progressively becomes an outcast like the creature. He is dehumanized by his obsession to hunt it and to get his revenge. They are both apart from other people: Victor has his secrets and the creature has a frightening appearance. Both have to keep their distance to survive. The creature is Victor Frankenstein's mirror: it is first curiosity, then knowledge and experience that lead both of them on the road to ruin. Indeed, Victor Frankenstein had a happy life, surrounded by the people he loved, and it is his obsession to create life which cursed him. He wanted to take the role of God but he was punished, like Prometheus was damned for having given the fire to men. The allusion to Prometheus is the element illustrating the tragic turn of the story.

All these allusions to the past linked to the present also need to be underlined: Victor studies Alchemy, a Medieval chemical art aimed at changing base metals into gold, or aims at discovering the elixir of perpetual youth. The architecture also has links with the Medieval era. Castles provide an ancient atmosphere: “we saw many ruined castles standing on the edges of precipices, surrounded by black woods, high and inaccessible” and “look at that castle which overhangs yon precipice...”<sup>56</sup> This also conveys a mysterious atmosphere, a remote and dangerous place. The reader once again feels unfamiliar with the landscape around him producing fear; both dungeons and prisons are present: “which lighted the dungeon of the unfortunate Muhammadan” or else “his blind and aged father [...] lay in a noisome dungeon”, “we entered the gloomy prison chamber and beheld Justine”, and “he was seized and cast into prison.”<sup>57</sup> This creates a claustrophobic climate. All these allusions to the past make up for a thrilling atmosphere, presenting the remains of what used to be and which is now ruined. It also suggests the barbarism and the obscurantism of this past era, in opposition to the Enlightenment, making the setting unfamiliar and thus frightening. However, it also conveys a Romantic feeling of nostalgia for the past.

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<sup>56</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 161.

<sup>57</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 87.

## The Curse of Loneliness

For Burke, a balance between the enjoyment of social interaction and moments of loneliness is necessary to be pleased: “[...] society [...] gives us no particular pleasure in the enjoyment, but absolute and entire *solitude*, that is, the total and perpetual exclusion from all society, is as great a positive pain as can almost be conceived.”<sup>58</sup> It is interesting to link this idea to the creature, first by underlining the fact that a social tie is impossible between the creature which suffers from being alone and society. It seeks acceptance but remains an outcast. Physical appearance is the first criterion on which people base their opinion. It determines its conduct towards the subject. The creature is already different from the average man (regarding the canons of beauty) in the way it was conceived with the largest limbs of human beings, creating a body which is both taller and stronger than a normal man.

The creature was rejected, abandoned from its birth. It inspired disgust to its creator because of its appearance, which is frightening. In chapter five, when the creature comes to life, there is an emphasis on the fear that Frankenstein feels, notably with the words “wretch”, “horror and disgust” or “the miserable monster whom I had created.”<sup>59</sup> Eventually, Victor Frankenstein runs away from it, abandons it. But in the following chapters, it is noticeable that the creature really wants to learn about human relationships, and be good to other people,

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<sup>58</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 40.

<sup>59</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 58-59.

when, for example, it tries its best to help the neighbouring family: “I discovered also another means through which I was enabled to assist their labour [...] during the night, I often took his tools [...] and brought home firing sufficient for the consumption of several days.”<sup>60</sup> and it learns to speak: “I learned and applied the words 'fire', 'milk', 'bread' and 'wood'.”<sup>61</sup>

However, it gradually becomes conscious of its difference and its loneliness at the same time. Then, a series of rejections will follow. When it finds the hut, the scared man runs away, and then with the cottagers. It also saved a girl from drowning, but the only thing it gets for it is disgust and fear from human beings and it will arouse in the creature feelings of revenge and hatred against human beings. Consequently, the creature adopts an evil behaviour because of the mistreatment it receives. Its loneliness compelled it to take revenge on its creator. The creature asked Victor to create a female mate for it:

You must create a female for me with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being. This you alone can do, and I demand it of you as a right which you must not refuse to concede...What I ask of you is reasonable and moderate; I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself; the gratification is small, but it is all that I can receive, and it shall content me. It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another. Our lives will not be happy, but they will be harmless and free from the misery I now feel. Oh! My creator, make me happy; let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit! Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing; do not deny me my request!<sup>62</sup>

Here the creature is conscious of its difference and of the ignorance of his own identity. This is why it chooses to see towards the future and to start a life with a creature like it, a

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60 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 115.

61 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 115.

62 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 147-178.

“monster”. Although it is dehumanised; this speech gives it human qualities: it tries to move, to pity and to convince its interlocutor. Even if the doctor accepted the proposition at first, he finally aborted the project. Furious, the creature strangled Victor Frankenstein’s fiancée in order to inflict on him the same grief of solitude. The creature ends up alone in the great North. Loneliness is painful and yet this is what it pursues. The paradox resides in the fact that physical solitude causes pain, however rejection by society – being a form of loneliness in itself- is even worse. It becomes the only way out for the creature. There lies the paradox, as it sacrifices its own liberty not to enjoy social interactions but to be freed from stigmatisation and social persecutions.

## **Part 3**

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## **PROGRESS**

## Chapter 7 – Discovery, invention

### Definitions

Progress is defined as a “development towards an improved or more advanced condition.”<sup>63</sup> In a broader sense, it also means an onward movement. Scientific progress is synonymous of an improvement of civilisations. Technique, from the Greek *tecknè* meaning art, craftsmanship is defined as “a way of carrying out a particular task, especially the execution or performance of an artistic work or a scientific procedure.”<sup>64</sup> Progress enables man to improve his life. However, scientific progress can be alienating and destructive if it is not controlled. Frankenstein’s thirst for progress led him to sinful pride. According to the Catholic Church doctrine, pride is the appropriation to one’s own merit of qualities or behaviours which are gifts from God. Frankenstein, in creating life, took the place of God. Indeed, technique implies both power and will, and power cannot be separated from violence. Nicolaus Copernicus discovered during the sixteenth century that the sun was the centre of the universe, and not the Earth, thereby implying that man and God were not the centre of the universe. Creativity and inventiveness were fostered by notions of political and economic liberties as well as the optimistic spirit of the Enlightenment. People became curious of the

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63 *Oxford Dictionary*, accessed November 10, 2012, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/>.

64 *Oxford Dictionary*, accessed November 10, 2012, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/>.

inventions of the time, but also of the mysteries of the world. The 1870 Education Act and the expansion of the printing business resulted in the popularisation of science among the Victorians. Foreign countries were explored and a lot of expeditions were made. Scientists developed their knowledge and science was officially recognised. Thanks to the discovery of the Rosetta Stone by French explorers, people knew about hieroglyphs. Palaeontology, geography and anthropology equally spread as official disciplines, leading people to ask questions, a thing they could not do before as they were punished by the Church. People feared the church less and less and started to reject the History brought by the Bible. Such an event like the Flood was questioned. Charles Darwin also disturbed religious spirits with the famous theory he developed in the Galapagos about the evolution of species, discovering their mutation. Both *On the Origins of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, respectively published in 1859 and 1871, were received with a huge success.

This led to debates between the religious people and the scientists. One of the most important took place in 1860, opposing S. Wilberforce to Huxley which led to the progressive acceptance of the theory of evolution.



## **The Revolutions**

In chemistry, to sublime is “to convert a solid substance by heat into a vapour, which on cooling condenses again to solid form, without apparent liquefaction.” or else “to volatilize from the solid state to a gas, and then condense again as a solid without passing through the liquid state.”<sup>65</sup> At the time and ever since the eighteenth century, experiences have been led, notably with electricity. The industrial revolution brought about a lot of changes, with the creation of machines and the introduction of steam power by James Watt. It started progressively to change people's everyday lives. In the 1850's, Britain was nicknamed “the workshop of the world”. Some of the inventions like the fireplace or the lightening conductor revealed man's control over nature. Discovery has a dual nature: first obsession and then pain. As discussed earlier, the obsession to reach knowledge is present throughout the novel. The title, *Frankenstein of The Modern Prometheus*, refers to an Ancient God, Prometheus, who gave fire to man, as a gift. By giving it to him he also gave power, and was punished by Zeus. His punishment was that he would be tied to a rock and his liver eaten by a bird of prey, only to regenerate endlessly. The novel could then be read as a philosophical tale telling us that science could be dangerous. The monster is given life by electricity. Victor Frankenstein will also be punished too for creating a monster. As men are subject to machines, Victor Frankenstein is subject to his obsession of breathing life into an inanimate body.

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65 Dictionary.com accessed November 12, 2012, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sublime>.

The notion of knowledge is present from the beginning of the novel, when Victor wants to reach the North Pole. In section one, Edmund Burke raises the question of curiosity, stating it is the most primary attribute of a human being. He qualifies it as “the most superficial of all of the affections, it changes its object perpetually; it has an appetite which is very sharp, but very easily satisfied, and has always an appearance of giddiness, restlessness and anxiety.”<sup>66</sup> This could describe Shelley's character, first because of his interests in alchemy but also for his thirst for knowledge and modern science. His fascination for the mystery of life starts to obsess him. Chapter two gives a strong illustration of Frankenstein's personality: “My temper was sometimes violent, and my passions vehement. [...] It was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn [...] the physical secrets of the world.”<sup>67</sup> The philosopher's stone and the elixir of life are mentioned: “I entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosopher stone and the elixir of life”<sup>68</sup>, however showing that richness, which would have been an obsessional quest for the majority of people, is less important than eternal life to Victor. It foreshadows the tragedy that will follow as it takes bigger proportions since he takes the place of God when he creates life.

Concerning the creature, as it experiences life, it is its contact to human beings which demeans it and causes it to be a murderer. Besides, Frankenstein warns Robert Walton, the person who found him drained and hopeless, against his desire to reach the North Pole. He

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66 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*.

67 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 39.

68 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 42.

underlines the dangerous nature of passion and obsession, illustrating their consequences by telling his own story.

Empiricism is the experience as the foundation of knowledge, while the sublime uses experience for another purpose: astonishment. Edmund Burke defined the sublime as “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”<sup>69</sup> Among the passions aroused by the sublime quoted by Burke, there is “Astonishment”. This is why reason cannot interfere, since the object generates an emotion that cannot make space for any other feelings or thoughts, with the exception of horror. Astonishment is “the effect of the sublime in its highest degree”. This places the creature as an exact object of the sublime. Indeed, Frankenstein's pain arises from disappointment and fear, which leaves him confused: “how can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe”, “unable to compose my mind to sleep”, “tumult”, “the bitterness of disappointment”, “the wretch whom I feared”, “I did not dare return to the apartment which I inhabited” or else “my heart palpitated in the sickness of fear.”<sup>70</sup> The nightmare about Elizabeth's death foreshadows a grievous future and reflects Frankenstein's state of mind.

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69 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 36.

70 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 101.

## Chapter 8 – Influence on the Arts

The expansion of the notions of political liberty and individual rights brought about the promotion of new artistic values. Some people regretted the way of life promoted by the pre-industrial era in Britain. They had the feeling that science was an alienating force, turning man into an inactive animal. Shelley's novel raises the question of the use of nature and science to accomplish selfish goals – or goals favouring an elite, as well as the boundaries of technology and the impact on social life. In painting too the exploitation of nature is denounced. In Caspar David Friedrich's paintings some elements are noticeable, notably the use of purple, the invasive presence of nature, snow, night, people pictured from the back, churches, clouds etc... In *The Monk by the Sea* (1908) (cf. Appendix I), the spectator feels the loneliness of the character, practically invisible, who seems to be contemplating a hostile nature. The cold tonalities of this painting stress the melancholic aspect and the feelings of solitude man as well as his powerlessness when faced with the forces of nature. Terror is conveyed. In *Frankenstein* some scenes are so precisely depicted that the reader could easily picture a painting in his mind:

I discovered more distinctly the black sides of the Jura, and the bright summit of Mont Blanc. [...] 'Dear mountains! My own beautiful lake! [...] Your summits are clear; the sky and lake are blue and placid. [...] Night also closed around; and when I could hardly see the dark

mountains, I felt still more gloomily. The picture appeared a vast and dim scene of evil, and I foresaw obscurely that I was destined to become the most wretched of human beings.<sup>71</sup>

The fact that the scene is apprehended by Victor perfectly conveys the sublimity emanating from it. It is in a fragile psychological state after the events he faced and the vastness as well as the darkness totally overwhelm him, like a spectator in front of a canvas. The colours which are mentioned also contribute to make a vivacious impression on the reader.

It is interesting now to focus on Henry Fuseli's work. He had a passion for the fantastic and his paintings generally reflect the themes of madness, violence and the macabre. He liked to depict people in motion. His famous painting, *The Nightmare* (c.f. Appendix III) represents a woman lying on a sofa dominated by a demon. There is a contrast between the light colours worn by the woman and the setting, which seems heavy and shadowy. This conveys the notions of the beautiful and the ugly, linked with good and evil. Shelley too conveyed such emotions thanks to hypotyposis:

The immense mountains and precipices that overhung me on every side – the sound of the river raging among the rocks, and the dashing of the waterfalls around, spoke of a power mighty as omnipotence – and I ceased to fear, or to bend before any being less almighty than that which I had created and ruled the elements, here displayed in their most terrific guise. Still, as I ascended higher, the valley assumed a more magnificent and astonishing character. Ruined castles hanging on the precipices of piny mountains; the impetuous Arve, and cottages every here and there peeping forth and among the trees, formed a scene of singular beauty. But it was augmented and rendered sublime by the mighty Alps, whose white and shining pyramids and domes towered above all, as belonging to another earth, the habitation of another race of beings.<sup>72</sup>

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71 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 76.

72 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 97.

This excerpt is very interesting as there is a synaesthesia. It is not just sight that is involved but also hearing: “the sound of the river”, and different emotions are mixed. There is a personification, verbs and adjectives like “spoke”, “assume [...] a character”, “peeping forth and among the trees” or “the Impetuous Arve...” applied to nature create a presence in this scene. This presence is qualified “omnipresent”, making a divine parallel, an unsurpassed power. There is an impression of motion that paradoxically suspend Frankenstein's emotions and feelings: “and I ceased to fear”, as if he were anaesthetised. Obviously immensity is underlined as well as the sublimity of the Alps. “The habitation of another race of beings” could be Frankenstein's hope of a civilisation which he could fit, which would dissipate his feeling of guilt and appease his mind.

William Turner was also interested in beautiful landscapes. At the time, the steam engine brought about a lot of sublime representations. Huge machines, massive production and the smoke and pollution exuding from chimneys inspired the artists of the time. *Steam and the Great Western Railway* (cf. Appendix IV) is a great example. He painted scenes from England, Scotland and even the Alps. He was meticulous regarding the choice of lights and colours, according to the time of the day and the seasons. For Goethe, colours bore moral qualities, and suggested emotions. Green was thus seen as a relaxing colour, blue was associated with coldness, red with youth etc. He painted the Colour Circle (cf appendix II) which influenced Turner. John Ruskin thought that colours were connected to morals, and that

the beautiful was good and the ugly was evil. For him colours do not reveal the outside world but are part of an inner process. However, late artists do not carry this vision any more, stating that colours are abstract and have no meaning. These artists thought that factories were evil for man and were not helping his improvement. They held political and moral positions. William Blake was also against the negative effects of industrialisation. In his poem, *And did those feet in ancient time*, he evokes the “dark satanic mills”. For him, body becomes a part of the machine and is thus less organic. The mind also turns into machine, and man is enslaved. The transformation of both body and mind into a machine leads to the destruction of man’s freedom and to a loss in the use of imagination and consequently of creation. This could be linked to Shelley’s moral message about the dangers of science and knowledge. Frankenstein became alienated by his ambitions and notched an “infernal creature”.

## CONCLUSION

The multiple representations of decaying buildings conveyed thanks to remote or unknown places, both in the novel and in paintings, are the secrets of the past hunting the present. Obscurity, which plays a great part in the novel, shows that beyond appearances which are accessible to reason and science, some facts remain arcane. This is true of psychological life and the subconscious, instinct and personality, in other words what compels the characters to act as they do, as well as their desires and their dreams, or even for the mysteries of the outside world like metaphysics, the study of the divine, religion and the unknown and the fantastic. Obscurity also breaks with Classicism, which promoted clarity. It reflects the mysteries of nature and sometimes the irrational. It darkens the destiny of the characters, expressing the subconscious and giving strength to words.

Mary Shelley's novel also sheds light on the condition of women at the time. Indeed, Mary Shelley, by having her character refuse to create a female partner denounces the fact that women were seen as entertaining and passive. The interesting reversal of feminine attributes in Victor Frankenstein is another interesting way to condemn this.

Along with the Gothic break from the Neoclassical tradition, especially in architecture, painting and in literature, Edmund Burke's judgements of taste break with the Classical



theory, “such as the connection of fitness or utility with aesthetic judgements (which requires the intervention of reason)”.<sup>73</sup>

*Frankenstein* shows the lack of control of the individual over history. The monster's rejection reflects society, it is misunderstood and yet it is not the initial culprit. The object of its rejection is caused by its ugliness. Society's promotion for what is beautiful is what created a monster. All the sublime elements of the novel noticed in this dissertation, along with the parallel analysis of Burke's essay provide a frame in which this question can be evoked. The opposition between the two notions implies that one of them must dominate the other. At the end of the novel, it is clear that the beautiful overshadows the sublime as dehumanization is omnipresent. The novel also demonstrates that man is a social animal who cannot exist out of society.

Overall, this novel presents several aspects in opposition with the Enlightenment, first because of the emphasis on the imagination and the overshadowing power of passion over reason, which was the cornerstone of the Enlightenment. The characters use their intuition rather than to lean on their experience throughout the novel, having most of the time abnormal psychological states. Indeed the nineteenth century saw the glorification of passion by the Romantics.

Furthermore, the accent is put on individualism, in opposition with the belief that there is a universal relationship between human beings which is shaped by reason.

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<sup>73</sup> Edmund Burke, *Enquiry*.

Discovery is an important element of the novel, as it is apprehended differently according to the characters. Walton is ready for anything to pursue his research, claiming he wants the best for humanity. Then, Victor Frankenstein warns him as his determination reminds of his own sacrifices and his tragic fate. To make him aware of his situation, he will tell his story.

Frankenstein is different from Prometheus. The latter was admittedly ambitious, but he acted for the good of humanity. Victor did not bring the fire to civilisation but the flame which destroyed it. He isolated himself from humanity to satisfy his desire of power and knowledge. Fear was also the driving force of his determination: to solve the secret of life would avoid him to suffer another time, like he did after his mother's death.

The fact that Walton decides to turn back shows the danger to cross the boundaries of knowledge and discovery. He has been warned by Victor and measures the consequences of a too strong a determination. He comes to terms with the idea that he will not search for the source of magnetism in the polar regions any more.

Finally, like Blake, Ruskin hated the factory system, and everything mechanical which threatened what was healthily organic. For him, no mechanical devices should be used to create works of art. Contrary to the arts, the factories divide men (Cf. Ruskin's text in appendix V and VI). If a work of art can touch us because it is beautiful and harmonious, sublimity encapsulates a notion of terror. Here, moral qualities are not linked to the creature's physical appearance, at least in the beginning. Indeed, it starts its life as innocent, however it

arouses fear and hatred in people. There is a criticism of society as its obsession for the beautiful and the parallel drawn with moral qualities originated a monster. The relationship between art and science is not clearly delimited if one thinks in terms of creation. Art requires technique and knowledge, which is discussed by Ruskin. Both artistic creation and scientific discovery are anchored in the creator's spirit. The difference may reside in the fact that one could be apprehended with in many ways, according to taste for example, and the other has just a single interpretation. The creature in *Frankenstein* is thus a complex work, resulting from the oversized imagination of its creator, and, at the same time, it is a considerable scientific achievement. It was made to please, in terms of beauty as well as of property, but also to reach a very ambitious objective: to create life and to challenge death. However, the creature is not really a source of terror provided by nature, but is born out of the alienated and narcissistic mind of a scientist.

**\*\*APPENDIX\*\***

**Appendix I**



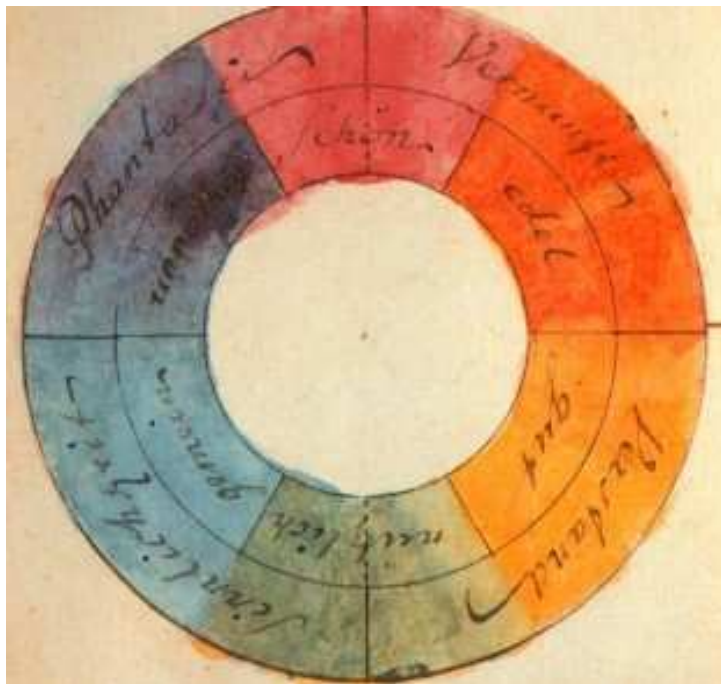
Appendix I: *The Monk by the Sea* by Caspar David Friedrich (1808)

## Appendix II



Appendix II: *The Nightmare* by Johann Heinrich Fuseli (1782)

## Appendix III



Appendix III: *Treatises on Colour* by Goethe (1810)

## Appendix IV



Appendix IV: *Steam and the Great Western Railway* by JMW Turner (1844)

## Appendix V

We have much studied and much perfected, of late, the great civilized invention of the division of labour; only we give it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men: — Divided into mere segments of men — broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin or the head of a nail. Now it is a good and desirable thing, truly, to make many pins in a day; but if we could only see with what crystal sand their points were polished, — sand of human soul, much to be magnified before it can be discerned for what it is — we should think that there might be some loss in it also. And the great cry that rises from our manufacturing cities, louder than their furnace blast, is all in very deed for this, — that we manufacture everything there except men; we blanch cotton, and strengthen steel, and refine sugar, and shape pottery; but to brighten, to strengthen, to refine, or to form a single living spirit, never enters into our estimate of advantages. And all the evil to which that cry is urging our myriads can be met only in one way: not by teaching nor preaching, for to teach them is but to show them their misery, and to preach at them, if we do nothing more than preach, is to mock at it. It can only be met by a right understanding, on the part of all classes, of what kinds of labour are good for



men, raising them, and making them happy; by a determined sacrifice of such convenience or beauty, or cheapness as is to be got only by the degradation of the workman; and by equally determined demand for the products and results of healthy and ennobling labour.

John Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic* from *The Stones of Venice*, 1851-1853<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Accessed November 28, 2012, <http://www.quotesstar.com/quotes/w/we-have-much-studied-and-123108.html>.

## Appendix VI

It would be well if all students would keep clearly in their mind the real distinction between those words which we use so often, "Manufacture," "Art," and "Fine Art." "Manufacture " is, according to the etymology and right use of the word, "the making of anything by hands," — directly or indirectly, with or without the help of instruments or machines. Anything proceeding from the hand of man is manufacture; but it must have proceeded from his hand only, acting mechanically, and uninfluenced at the moment by direct intelligence. Then, secondly, Art is the operation of the hand and the intelligence of man together; there is an art of making machinery; there is an art of building ships; an art of making carriages; and so on. All these, properly called Arts, but not Fine Arts, are pursuits in which the hand of man and his head go together, working at the same instant. Then Fine Art is that in which the hand, the head, and the heart of man go together.

John Ruskin, *The Unity of Art*, lecture delivered in Manchester, 14 March 1859 in *Two Paths*.

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## Abstract

This study attempts to focus on Mary Shelley's creature in *Frankenstein*. The aim was first to focus on the physical aspect of it, drawing on the origins of the sublime and of the Gothic genre notably thanks to Burke's *Enquiry*, better to concentrate on the Romantic movement and to give an account on the novelistic aspects of the book. The accent was also put on the female characters of the novel, providing some historical context, notably the condition of the nineteenth century woman. Then, to close the first part, the task was to concentrate on the question of judgement, illustrated in this connection with the works of Kant or Gerard.

Furthermore, what was interesting then was to explore the domain of pathology, raising the question of norm and normality better to highlight the condition of the creature, but also its creator's. Having a strong interest in Freud's works, I found interesting to give an importance to the psyche. What was then consistent was to take a larger point of view by evoking society and more precisely the exclusion of it.

Finally, this study aimed at analysing deeper the notion of progress, be it scientific or artistic. A solid historical context was brought better to understand the period in which *Frankenstein* saw the day, and what made the so particular and fascinating atmosphere that

Shelley created what it is. It also seemed important for me to joint some characteristic paintings of the time, notably the ones of Fuseli, Turner or Friedrich.

### **Key words**

Frankenstein – Shelley – Sublime – Burke – Literature – Gothic – Science – Progress -