

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Lecture 12

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We'll start with a new novel today, which happens to be Mary Shelley's very famous novel, Frankenstein. Now, in this particular section and in the subsequent session as well, we look at the background of the novel. So, what we'll do is we will start looking at some of the secondary scholarship of the novel and through the secondary scholarship, we'll come to the main text, if you will. Now, the edition we're using to study this text is a 2017 MIT Press edition, which is interestingly meant for scientists and engineers. So, as you can see, this should be on your screen. This is a very interesting logo of Frankenstein on your screen. And it's annotated for scientists, engineers, and creators of all kinds. So it's a very different and radically new approach to the novel. I mean, this is an edition which is not meant, I mean, it's not designed specifically and only for humanities scholars, but also encompassing and addressing scientists and engineers, because I think part of the editorial effort in this novel, in this edition, is to also look at how, you know, this novel can be seen, can be read, can be examined as a cautionary tale for scientists, as something which can be addressed to scientists and how, because the content of the plot in the novel is about the misadventures in science, it's about what goes wrong in a very, very hubristic scientific experiment.

Which we'll talk about in a minute, right? So annotated for scientists, engineers, and creators of all kinds. And these are the editors, David Guston, Ed Finn, and Jason Scott Robert. So very, very interesting names who looked at this book. And this is Mary Shelley. You know, as you know, Mary Shelley wrote this one novel, which made a very, very famous and is one of the most famous novels ever, Frankenstein. And it's almost acquired, a mythical status, the whole idea of creating this super scientific creature who ends up

becoming a quote unquote monster. And we will talk about the entire politics of monstrosity in a bit. But the danger it creates for science, the danger it creates for society and in many ways, it is a cautionary tale about the limitless ambition in science, the limitlessness in science, what happens if we do unprincipled science. And then, of course, the whole idea of moral accountability. So, what happens to once you create a quote unquote creature, I mean, are you accountable for it? Are you accountable for its actions? And can you be held morally accountable as a creator for that creature who becomes a problem for the system, right? Now, we will not go too deep into biographical details. So, we will skip this bit a little bit and then move on to the introduction and some of the preface. So as you can see, this is MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, published in 2017. So I just want to spend a little bit of time talking about the edition because I think it makes sense, it is relevant given how we are about to study this novel, the kind of press, the kind of edition that we are looking at and what are the intellectual implications of choosing this particular version. of the novel.

Now, we look at the editor's preface a little bit in the first session before we move on to the introduction by Charles E. Robinson. So, what we will do is to look at the secondary criticism, the secondary scholarship and you know find a way back into reading the text as it were instead of looking at the text directly, we will also look at certain selected passages, certain selected sections of the novel which lend themselves as it were to interesting critical reading. of various kinds. So, as you can see the many essays in this particular edition about traumatic responsibility, the changing conceptions of human nature, undisturbed reality and the whole idea of you know the Promethean quality in the novel as well. Prometheus, of course, as you know, is a mythical figure who was, you know, who is seen as an archetype for subversion, an archetype for doing something which is prohibited and as a result and stealing fire from the gods, this old ancient myth. And as a result, he would tie it to a stone and a vulture would peck at his body. So it becomes an allegory for an archetype for subversion and the retribution that comes, the consequences of subversion, the consequence of doing something immoral, something which is transgressive in quality. So in many ways, this novel is also about transgression, about crossing the boundary, crossing the permissible perimeter. of science, of knowledge, of creation and what are the

consequences which follow once one does it. Now, as I mentioned, I will spend a little bit of time today especially the first section looking at the editor's preface and this is written by David Houston, Guston sorry, David Guston, Ed Finn and Jason Scott Robert and as you can see the preface is interesting because it talks about how this book is important for scientists today in terms of how the choice of this edition, why is this edition important and why should we have this novel taught not just the humanities scholars, not just the social sciences scholars but to scientists, to engineers, to creators, to innovators, to techno-innovators today.

So in many ways Frankenstein I think is a very relevant text for us. I mean now that we find ourselves in this entire debate about artificial intelligence, this entire debate about genetic creation, biogenetics and all the rest of it, this novel which is about transgressing the biological boundaries of creation, transgressing the biological norms of creation and procreation It really resonates in the kind of intellectual, social, moral debates we have around us today. So, this should be on your screen, the very first paragraph of the preface that we will read line by line in order to get the real spirit of this edition, the real spirit of this draft and how this edition becomes a very important way to enter the text and through the text in different cultural situations that this particular text is corresponding to. So as is there in the screen, no work of literature has done more to shape the way human beings or humans imagine science and its moral consequences than Frankenstein or the modern Prometheus. So, I mentioned how the subtitle is important. The allegory of the Promethean figure is important for us because the Prometheus, of course, emerges as the archetype of subversion, the allegory of subversion. And that sense becomes an important figure because there is subversion, there is transgression in Frankenstein. as well. So, Mary Shelley's remarkably enduring tale of creation and responsibility So, you know, this is some kind of an interesting anecdote, but one can easily and safely say that Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein perhaps has had more of a lasting legacy than anything written by a famous poet husband, Percy Bessie Shelley, a major romantic poet. Some of you will have read Shelley's poetry. He's got a famous poem called Prometheus Unbound, And of course, he was seen at this time as well as later in scholarship on Romantic literature as one of the major Romantic poets along with Willem Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord

Byron and John Keats. Shelley was seen very much in line in the same pedigree of poetry. However, as I mentioned that you know Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein on the modern Prometheus has had more of a lasting effect, more of a legacy if you will in terms of literary output, in terms of literary reception. Just a little bit of a biographical detail. We will not go too far into it, but we need to know that Frankenstein is a literary offspring, as is there on your screen, the literary offspring of an 18-year-old girl ensconced in a romantic yet fraught summer gateway on the shores of Lake Geneva in response to a dare to come up with a cool story. So, this was a contest, you know, some kind of funny contest, right? A ghost story in which Lord Byron, as well as

Percy, Bessie, Shelley were also involved to come up with a ghost story which would be the scariest one. Mary Shelley started writing Frankenstein as part of this almost comical contest, a dare contest to come up with a ghost story. That dare was issued a little more than 200 years ago. In writing Frankenstein, Mary produced both in the creature and its creator, tropes that continue to resonate deeply with contemporary audiences. So, as I just mentioned, that perhaps Frankenstein resonates more complexly, more deeply, more immediately in contemporary bioscientific, infoscience culture that we inhabit today, not limited to algorithms and artificial intelligence and biotechnology and bioscience and biogenetics. So, in a way, it continues to resonate in very diachronic ways you know, across generations in a very intergenerational way. Moreover, these tropes and imaginations they engender actually influence the way we confront emerging science and technology. So our confrontation, our intellectual, moral confrontations with science and technology, you know, we find this interesting representation of the same confrontation happening in this novel, in this fictional novel. Conceptualize the process of scientific research. Imagine the motivations and ethical struggles of scientists and weigh the benefits of scientific research against the anticipated and unforeseen pitfalls. So, as you can see, it is a very loaded sentence. It talks about the anticipated perils, the precarity of scientific creation and in many ways Mary Shelley's Frankenstein may be seen as a novel about precarity. as a novel about the production of precarity, which is also the flip side of knowledge, the flip side of a super scientific progress. So, in the process of creating a super scientific episteme, if you talk about episteme as a knowledge mode, as a knowledge network, as a knowledge

structure, the process of creating that knowledge structure, what we also get in this particular novel is the precarity which is produced alongside the knowledge structure.

So, I think in a way, this particular edition, as I mentioned, in terms of how it appeals to scientists today, it appeals to bioscientists, appeals to technoscientists today, is interesting. And so, this edition, which is meant for that kind of readership, is also a very, very innovative way to read the novel. Mary Shelley's landmark fusion of science, ethics and literary expression provides an opportunity both to reflect on how science is framed and understood by the public. and to contextualize new scientific and technological innovations, especially in an era of synthetic biology, genome editing, robotics, machine learning and regenerative medicine. So as you can see, the vocabulary here is very modern. It's extremely contemporary is extremely relevant to the world we live in today and this edition is the 2017 edition, so less than seven years ago. So, very, very contemporary, very relevant to our times. And some of the things which are mentioned in this preface you know synthetic biology, genome editing, machine learning, robotics, so these are things which are very, very important. These are big intellectual debates, these are big scholarly debates, a lot of capital, a lot of intellectual capital, real capital, They invest in this kind of research. So, Frankenstein becomes an important fictional representation to calibrate the anxieties, the precarities, the possibilities around this kind of research. Although Frankenstein is infused with the exhilaration of seemingly unbounded human creativity, it also prompts serious reflection about our individual and collective responsibility for nurturing the products of our creativity and imposing constraints on our capacities to change the world around us, right.

So, the word important, you know, the important word over here is, you know, the idea of constraint. So, should there be any constraints in our capacity to change the world around us? Should there be any territory, any legal territory, any knowledge? This is why we inhabit or we come by the entire entanglement of knowledge and legality. So, what should be legal knowledge? What should be illegal knowledge? To what extent should knowledge be free? To what extent should knowledge and creativity be allowed to run uninhabited, uninhibited? Or should there be any protection? Or should there be any security? Should

there be any territory within which knowledge should operate? Because, you know, subverting that or transgressing that may cause moral dilemmas, may cause social problems. So, these are the ethical questions that we grapple with today. You know, all the big scientific institutes today have this human rights section, they have this ethics section, they have this accountability section. And as you know, almost all big major scientific experiments and scientific projects have to mark themselves compatible with ethics exercises. The entire ethics debate is important today as it should be. Of course, connected to ethics is the question of accountability. To what extent is science accountable? To what extent is scientific technology accountable? in terms of its manifestations, in terms of its impact on society, immediate as well as long-lasting impact. And these are questions, these are issues which the novel, Mary Shelley's novel, flags up in very, very complex ways.

So, engaging with Frankenstein allows a broad public and especially future scientists and engineers to consider the history of a scientific progress together with our expanding abilities in the future and to reflect on evolving understandings of the responsibilities such abilities entail. So the question of responsibility becomes important, the whole futuristic quality of science becomes important. So it's not just enough to say that this is an immediate exciting work in the present one also has to anticipate is short-term as well as long-term effects in the future and to what extent are the anticipated effects should contribute towards a calibration of the contemporary scientific project you know should we be more guarded in a scientific project should we be more careful and cautioned in a scientific scientific project should there be a cautionary quality about the technological advancement, or should we be allowed to run untrammled, just purely on creative spirit? So these are the ethical questions. And of course, as you can imagine, these are very grey areas. right or wrong answer to this debate. There is no neat or decisive answer to these kind of questions, very complex questions. But this is a book, this is a novel which really opens up this can of worms and allows us or invites us really to engage with these ethical questions, very deep dark ethical questions around the notion of an ontology of creation, procreation, reproduction and accountability of science. So, this is the philosophical model framework that is novelists espousing and then we have this big debate about how the edition came into being. But just to give you a context in terms of how the ontology of the creature

appears in Frankenstein, this should be on your screen, it is worth pointing out that the way we now use the word creature ignores a richer etymology.

So, some of the words we use today may have come from different roots. So, we consider these words to be something different, but semantically and etymologically. But if you go back to the roots of these words, you find that a different etymological investment and entanglement, which we should bear in mind as students of literature, as scholars of literature. Today, we refer to birds and bees as creatures. Living things are creatures by virtue of their living nests. So, there's an automatic association of animation and something being a creature. So, it must have life, it must have life spirit, it must be biological, it must be organic in order to be considered as a creature, in order to be classified as a creature. When we call something a creature today, we rarely think in terms of something that has been created and thus we erase the idea of a creator behind the creature, right? So this disconnect or decoupling between the creator and the creature is something of a modern phenomenon, right? It wasn't there since inception. We've likewise lost the social connotation of the term creature, for creatures are made not just biologically or magically, but also socially, right? The social construction of creatures, something we must remind ourselves of. In a contemporary film, Victor Frankenstein in 2015, for example, Harry Potter's Daniel Radcliffe plays Igor, Victor's hunchback assistant. So again, we find how not present in Mary's novel, but invented for stage and screen. So, you know, Daniel Radcliffe, who is famous for playing Harry Potter, the eponymous hero in J.K. Rowling's novel, he plays this interesting character called Igor, who is not there in the original novel, but he obviously serves a symbolic purpose. invented for stage and screen, who was rescued from a circus, cured of his malformation, and embraced by Victor, first as assistant, and then as partner in his laboratory, right? So, he is someone who is definitely able who has a physical problem, but he is cured by Victor Frankenstein in this particular adaptation.

And he subsequently goes on to become Victor's partner in the laboratory from being an assistant to a partner. So, more and more agents are acquired in the process, as you can imagine. Victor raises him from a subhuman existence, even giving him the name Igor, because the freak show Hunchback has no name. It makes him an English gentleman

worthy of invitations to clubs and balls. and even the affection of a beautiful woman. Now, this should remind you, and the reason why I'm reading this passage, this should remind you of something similar which happened in Robinson Crusoe, where Crusoe just rescues a quote-unquote cannibal, a quote-unquote savage, and gives him a name, gives him an identity, gives him a social status, and makes him, you know, not just acceptable, but also desirable in many ways, right? So, Friday, the character Friday, the creature Friday, who was created by Robinson Crusoe in Daniel Defoe's novel, you know, some parallel between that and what happens in this adaptation of Frankenstein, where Igor, who's a hunchback, is created essentially, socially created by Victor, and then he becomes not just, you know, an acceptable figure, but also someone who is worthy of affection of a beautiful woman. Igor understands that he is Victor's creator in this regard, but as surely, just as surely as if his life were created from non-life, right? So, there's very direct relationship, an organic relationship between creator and creature over here. So, the creator had invented or manufactured or give life to the creature as if the creature didn't have life before. So, the creature emerges from non-life into life through the process of creation, which is controlled by the creator. So, to recognize both the biological and the social aspects of creation, as well as the failure of Mary's Victor to name his creation, thus rejecting the creature's social creation, we have decided on the creature. So, Mary, Victor and the creature constitute the trinity of a text, right. So, the triangulation, if you will, Mary, Victor and the creature, they constitute the triangulated text that we are about to read. So as you can see how this particular. It has a very interesting take on the entire novel.

It is giving a very radical reading in terms of locating it within the current contemporary debates in bioscience and artificial intelligence and robotics and machine learning. But also, how it invites us back. It forces us to reconsider the relationship between creation and creature. And this whole process of creation, how it's not an accidental process, but an agentic process which involves the maker. And of course, the body which gets made in the end. Right. So, and then we skip a little bit. We come to the... you know, the introduction of the novel, and how, you know, Mary Shelley is obviously, the biographical reading of Mary Shelley, and how the whole idea of creating this novel emerged from some kind of a game, but at the same time, it is also important to remember and relocate the

writer's situation in the context of this particular work of fiction, because Mary Shelley, of course, went through a series of tragedies, losing several children biological children and how the loss of the child, the dead child is always some kind of a spectral presence in the novel. So that subtext of the dead child, the subtext of the spectral child is very much an important interpretative act that we must engage in. Now we move on to the introduction, which is by Charles E. Robinson, and see what that tells us about the novel in terms of how that allows us to frame the reading of the novel, the different frames we can use. So, let's find out what kind of focal frames are at play over here. So, this is the introduction by Charles Robinson, which tells us, in this novel written by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Now, again, some of you know that Mary Shelley was the daughter of a famous father, wife of a famous husband. But at the same time, she wrote something which is arguably much, much more famous than whatever her father or husband ever produced. That one novel, Frankenstein, which has been recycled, recirculated, recreated, reconstructed so many times in so many different ways, including new adaptations which have new characters.

So, in this novel written by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Victor Frankenstein, never called Dr. Frankenstein, leaves behind his idyllic childhood on Edenic Geneva. So, interesting how Victor Frankenstein is never called Dr. Frankenstein. So, the word doctor, obviously, it connotes something, it implies something, there's a classification to it. And Victor is not part of the classification. And that tells us something in terms of how we should read the novel. So, the journey of Victor is, you know, a very interesting journey. He leaves behind his idyllic childhood. It's almost a biblical childhood, almost an Oedipal childhood. And then Edenic Geneva, goes to university, studies the latest technologies and medical procedures, creates an unnamed monster. Again, the unnamed monster is important because the whole idea of monstrosity, in this novel is formed from an excess, from a problem. So, what we also find in the novel is how there's a very thin line between sublimity and monstrosity. So, what is sublime? It is also transcendental, but it's also something transgressive about the sublime because it's transgressing the recognizable borders, the recognizable territories. And that same transgressive quality is also invested in monstrosity. So at a very ontological level, The monstrous and the sublime, they are constantly

dialoguing with each other. So, he goes to university, studies the latest technological and medical procedures, creates an unnamed monster and suffers the dangerous consequences of his pursuit of knowledge when his creature destroys his brother William, his wife Elizabeth and his best friend Henry Clerval. In short, Frankenstein is a cautionary tale. And it is now for the first time published by an Institute of Technology for the purpose of educating students who are pursuing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, right? So as you can see, part of the reason why I also chose this edition is because it addresses a more holistic reading group, right? So we talk about how, you know, scientists are also a model responsibility in terms of knowing what is happening to the inventions, in terms of knowing what is happening to the products they're creating out of the lab, right? How is that being utilized? How is that being abused or used or appropriated for different purposes? So in that sense, you know, this particular edition, this particular take on Frankenstein, if you will, is a very, very innovative take.

So up until this edition, Frankenstein had been primarily edited and published for and read by humanities students, you know, students equally in need of reading this cautionary tale about forbidden knowledge and playing God. You know, so again, Victor Frankenstein novel, he plays God, he wants to replace God, he wants to replace creator. And he wants to create a body, an organism which is supposedly better, more refined, more sophisticated than man, the species man, right, in order to create a better species, a more sublime species, if you will. And of course, this is a mis-experiment. It is an experiment gone awry. And it comes back to home to him to the point that he has now to destroy it. That's the entire tale in this particular novel. And to embrace the largest audience, we are publishing what may be also defined as a STEAM edition of Frankenstein, the A edited in for the Arts, Designs and Humanities, a STEAM edition, the Science, Technology, Engineering, arts, design and humanities and of course mathematics can also be seen as medicine, right. So, it is a very holistic epistemic framework that this particular edition is targeting and what I also invite you to think and consider is how this particular novel is not just a very, very wonderful, complex, fabulous representation of its context and in the process representation of the changes happening in that context which is the whole purpose of this particular course but how In a very diachronic way, it keeps speaking to us. And you find this is true for almost

all the novels. In fact, all the novels we read in this course, that these novels keep speaking to us in different ways and in very diachronic ways. And they keep getting resonated. They keep getting, they keep finding resonance in terms of how they correspond to contemporary times in 2024 that we inhabit today. So we stop at this point and we continue into a deeper reading of this introduction in the subsequent class. Thank you for your attention.