

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Lecture 15

Frankenstein - Part 4

Hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We are continuing discussion on Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. So we will take off from where we left last time and we were discussing. So what we're doing in these sessions is we're looking at the text and the context together. Unlike what we did in Robinson Crusoe, we look at the novel Frankenstein in close correspondence to the scholarship around the novel. which would also enable us to situate the novel in the complex cultural condition and the contemporary cultural condition around which the novel was produced. And what has emerged already in our discussion, as if you remember, is these constant tensions between different discourses and science, because this was a time where some orders of scientific knowledge were being replaced by new orders. So alchemy, for example, was going out of fashion and natural philosophy, natural sciences were coming in. So it's almost like some kind of academic debate is going on in the novel, and an academic discipline is being replaced by a new academic discipline. So the politics of disciplinarity, the politics of academic pedagogic disciplinarity, is also prevalent, among other things, in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.

And we saw last time how different professors in the university that Victor Frankenstein goes to, they embody different values, different orders, different theoretical epistemic orders. And how Victor Frankenstein's journey as a scientist also becomes quite emblematic of the transition from the old order of alchemy and science to a newer order of natural philosophy and natural sciences. So we'll see that as we move along even more. But what is also there in the novel from the very beginning is a sense of accountability. So,

what happens if science becomes less and less accountable, right. So, the moral accountability, the ethical accountability of science and what happens if science is let go absolutely unchecked and then the whole idea of human hubris comes into being, the whole idea of human hamartia comes into being. So as you know hamartia, hubris So these are classical components from Greek tragedies, for example, Hamartia being the, you know, the whole idea of the human error, the fatal flaw which causes the destruction in the protagonist or the hero. Hubris, of course, is arrogance, the idea of the overreachers, overconfidence with which, which brings about the downfall subsequently. So, Frankenstein also has elements of classical tragedy because we have here a great scientist a great thinker who has these two tragic flaws, hamartia and hubris.

So, the entire novel is also presented, you know, many times this comes up and we will look at it today as well. It is also presented through some kind of cautionary tale narrative framework, right. But of course, it is much more than that. We have already seen how Frankenstein also embodies a very strong, subtle feminist critique of the very patriarchal masculinist notions of science, which includes the idea of appropriating procreation and taking it away from the woman and making some kind of a biological experiment through which procreation can be done, which does away with the need, the moral, the biological need of the woman, right. So that is also part of the hubris. And nature, topography, biology, so all these are very interestingly and very conveniently feminized in the novel. So, we have this bunch of very, very intelligent men very enterprising men who are trying to tame nature, tame the biological sciences so that they can have a more, a better navigational authority. And this navigational authority is something which is exemplified both by the sailor and the scientist. So in some sense the sailor and the scientist they are alter egos of each other in the novel. Because both essentially want the same thing. They want to navigate nature. They want to navigate and control and calibrate and make nature into some kind of cartographic construct, which can be mapped, which can be formulated, which can be easily explored, right. So the part of the adventure narrative in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is also part of the territorialization narrative, part of the domination narrative. So you want to take over, dominate, territorialize, take control and essentially tame nature, essentially tame in the biological principles of life. And that desire to tame, that desire to

navigate, that desire to map, maybe, you know, read in very close correspondence to the whole idea of the man taming the wild woman, right.

So, that very stereotypical, very masculinist, very problematic narrative of taming and reining in and controlling, it finds different manifestations in the novel. So, this should be on your screen. We will continue with this debate about the whole idea of the moral principles which should underline scientific research, which should underline scientific inquiry. And if you remember, and I'm sure you do, that we're reading on edition of Frankenstein, which is also uniquely designed for STEM students. And then the editors go on to say STEAM students, because of science, technology, engineering, also arts and humanities, and then mathematics or medicine, depending on what your discipline is. So STEAM edition, right? So, in a way, it's a very holistic reading of the novel, because it operates on principle of addressing scientists, future scientists, future engineers, future technocrats, but also equally people in the humanities and social sciences. And, you know, as we have discussed already, the moral debate in Frankenstein, the ethical debate in Frankenstein, in some way is uniquely resonant to the world we live in today, the world of bioengineering, algorithms, artificial intelligence, an entire interplay of euphoria and paranoia that we see around these things, right. So this becomes a more guarded approach to these scientific technological discourses. So we will read the introduction in close details which will also bring us or enable us to read the text in certain selected passages and this should be on your screen. Despite these endorsements of chemistry and natural philosophy in her novel, Mary realized that science could be abused and is certainly evident in Victor's reckless and selfish experiments. So, the abuse of science, the abuse of the scientific intellect, which leads on to recklessness, which leads on to the production of precarity.

So, there's a precarious condition produced because of reckless, irresponsible science. which do not account for their consequences, right, so they are not accountable, there is no accountability over here. Even Victor was aware of the distinction between his selfish actions and his selfless actions. In his initial conversation with the scientific explorer Robert Walton, so we have already mentioned how Walton and Frankenstein can be seen as interesting counterpoints to each other, alter egos to one another because both of them

essentially want the same thing. They are, you know, heading off to a reckless exploration with the desire to tame, desire to navigate, desire to map, you know, the biological, the topographic narrative, the topographic landscape, the biological landscape as well as the topographic landscape, know in the conversation that Victor has with Robert Walton, the narrator of this frame tale novel, so if you know Frankenstein is a frame tale novel as in the different frames of narration. It starts off with Robert Walton's narrative which is an epistolary one. He is writing a letter to his sister and within the narrative is nested you know Victor Frankenstein's narrative and within Victor Frankenstein's narrative we get to see other characters and then of course the quote unquote monster comes in the end and gets to tell his side of the story right and Walton of course is the ultimate narrator he is the final grid in this Chinese box structure of narration so this is what Victor Frankenstein tells Robert Walton I will not lead you on unguarded and ardent as I was then than was to your destruction and infallible misery Victor continues Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow, right. So this is a classic example of transgressive knowledge. It's a warning against transgression, right, because and obviously it's too late now because Victor Frankenstein has essentially wasted his whole life and now all he can do is warn other people not to do what he has done.

So, he said learn from me by my example and the happiest is a person who learns to be happy within their small campus, small perimeter of the native town, right, and not someone who is constantly desirous of leaving and making it big and so on and so forth. And most importantly, one who aspires to become greater than nature will allow. So there is a sense of allowance, a sense of permission that nature gives. And if you defy this permission, what you end up becoming is a transgressor, you know, an iconoclast, someone who is committing almost a sacrilegious sin. And there is a lot of Christian sentiment in the novel as well, in terms of someone who is a prodigal son, disobeying the father, disobeying the old moral structure and suffering the consequences of it. Something similar had also happened in Robinson Crusoe, albeit in a different thing. And, you know, a large part of Robinson Crusoe was also expended or invested towards promoting or

foregrounding a cautionary tale. So do not do what I did. Because I had transgressed, I disobeyed my father, defied my father and now the entire story may be also read as a cautionary tale. But with Robinson Crusoe it was more ambivalent because you know there's also the good things that happened to Crusoe. He became wealthier, he saw large parts of the world, he came back and he could move on with a normal life. With Victor Frankenstein, it is even darker. It's more depressing. It's more, in a sense, more apocalyptic in quality, right? So this ultimate destruction which has happened and there's no going back for Victor Frankenstein.

And in a way, in the end, he has to destroy himself as well as what he has created. On its deathbed at the end of the novel, Victor addresses a similar warning to Walton. Seek happiness in tranquility and avoid ambition. Again, look at the very moral vocabulary over here, very Christian moral vocabulary. Avoid ambition. Ambition which leads to transgression and transgression will lead to destruction and misery. And, you know, there's no coming back of this. It's a point of no return. even it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries yet why do I say this I have been blasted myself blasted in these hopes yet another may succeed so look at this very very interesting dichotomy over here right so on one hand he is trying to be this mainstream moral man, trying to give a cautionary tale to his successor and say well do not overambish, do not be overambitious, do not be the overreacher, do not be the transgressor and yet who am I to say these things to you because I have blasted my hopes in these pursuits. But the last line here is important, yet another may succeed, right. So, someone else might come after me and may succeed. So, that, that germ, that seed is still there in terms of the desire to succeed. So, on one hand, there is this you know, pull towards apology, pull towards repentance, pull towards redemption. On the other hand, the other thing is also there, the other pull towards ambition, towards transgression, towards overreaching, that too is present. So, there is this innate complex contradiction in Frankenstein, which we must be aware of.

Although Mary seems to be leaving the door open here for a future when selflessness and science will mutually serve each other, the novel's basic argument is that science can be as

destructive as it is constructive. There is this moral ambivalence about science, which we find that it has come up in many ways later also. Think of, let's say, the entire moral ambivalence around the atomic bomb. You know, those of you who've seen say even a very popular cultural representation which is very recent something like *Oppenheimer* for example where too this dilemma is there and the whole idea of creating this ultimate source of destruction from the ultimate pursuit of intellectual science. So the ultimate pursuit of intellect can also lead on to the ultimate source of destruction. So again, the very, very problematic juxtaposition of creation and destruction, the very problematic juxtaposition between building this super scientific power, at the same time also opening the door for the absolute apocalyptic destruction, which happened with the atomic bomb. So, the whole idea of the atomic bomb, the whole moral dilemma around the atomic bomb also finds itself very dialogic with what's happening in Mary Shelley's novel. The argument about the dangers of knowledge is emphasized when the creature found a fire which had been left by some wandering beggars, and was overcome with delight at the warmth experienced from it. In my joy, I thrust my hand into the live embers, but quickly drew it out again with a cry of pain. How strange, I thought, that the same cause should produce such opposite effects. Now, this sense of opposition is there in the very beginning of the novel.

So, this is page 84. And this is why we're reading it together, because it allows us to read the novel and the criticism around it at one go. It helps us navigate the traffic between the text and the context through a very, very good literary essay. Now, the monster, the quote-unquote monster, also found this out at the beginning, where he said, oh, there's fire, and then the fire was something which gave me warmth, which nurtured me, so to speak. So I put my hand inside the burning embers and withdrew it because, obviously, it caused immense amount of hurt and pain. That was the point in which the creature realized that you know that which can give you comfort, that which can give you succor, that which can give you warmth can also cause absolute destruction even death, right? So how the same cause should produce opposite effects. So, there is this very, very interesting philosophy that is running throughout the novel *Frankenstein* that the difference between destruction and construction, the difference between pain and succor, the difference between comfort and absolute, you know, hurt is not always very, very clearly mapped out. So that can be

the same soul, the same entity, the same ontological principle, the same functional principle can cause both. And of course, the fire metaphor is important over here, given the subtitle of the novel, you know, the modern Prometheus, as I mentioned some time ago. If you remember that the Promethean subtext is very, very useful over here because Prometheus, of course, was an overreacher, a transgressor, someone who disobeyed, you know, the dictates of the father, the dictates of the old moral principle, stole fire from the heavens, taught the use of fire to man. That's the allegory about Prometheus. And as a result, he was, you know, cursed to damnation, eternal damnation. So the curse of Prometheus, he would be tied to a rock and, you know, vultures would come and peck at his body and his body would rot away and then grow back again. So he would not even die. So there's no redemption with death that Prometheus will, you know, find. So it'll just be a constant cycle of pain.

And that's something which is referred to here as well. By a subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*, Mary is asking the reader to recall the Promethean myth. So that's something that we should also be careful as scholars. So what is the Promethean myth doing as a subtext to the novel, right? And this is a subtext, the subtext of transgression. The subtext of going against the will of the old moral principle, the subtext of being the overreacher, and the consequences, the moral consequences, the painful consequences of being the overreacher, the transgressor. So, the Promethean myth in which a Titan Prometheus, Titan is the one below God. So the Titan Prometheus steals fire representing knowledge, fire here being obviously the symbol of knowledge, a symbol of power, the symbol of agency. the device with which it can create other devices, the meta device, steals fire from the Olympian Zeus, Zeus being the ultimate god, this is a Greek myth, to give to primal and pre-rational man only to suffer the consequences of his actions. So, you know, going against the will of Zeus, going against the will of the father god, you know, Prometheus suffers, you know, the eternal damnation, eternal consequences. So what happens? Zeus chains Prometheus, the creator of rational man, to a rock where he is visited daily by a vulture slash eagle.

The different myths have different representations. Sometimes it's a vulture, sometimes

it's an eagle, that devours his liver and heart only to have the same punishment repeated each day. So it's a cycle of pain, you know, constant repetition of pain, absolute pain. So knowledge does cause sorrow and fire does cause pain and the etymology of the name Prometheus of forethought is ironic because the name Prometheus means forethought and that's exactly what is missing. There is no forethought, there is no anticipation of what might happen through the dire consequences of bad action, immoral action. This is irony embedded in the name Prometheus, forethought. Victor, the modern Prometheus, lacks forethought and fails to understand the destructive consequences of his actions in constructing his creature, right? So the whole idea of the absent forethought is important over here because Victor is, you know, tragically realizes that what he had done showed poor forethought, right? Because, you know, he did something which has caused ultimate destruction in the narrative. Prometheus's brother, Epimetheus, afterthought so again Epimetheus is associated with all the evils released from Pandora's box fulfilling the myth that had been the technocratic decisions leading to the pesticide ddt the atom bomb three mile island chernobyl and the British government's permission reported in the British newspapers on 1 February 2016 that stem cell scientists could perform genome editing despite objections that ethical issues were being ignored. This is why this introduction is so useful for us because look at how it contemporizes Mary Shelley's novel leading into as recent as February 1, 2016 where stem cell was permitted, sanctioned by law passed by the British government and that of course has had some very, very serious and complex consequences. But the whole idea of Prometheus and the whole idea of afterthought and forethought you know Epimetheus you know associated with Pandora's boxes you know you open Pandora's box and then you can't close it back you can't undo the action once it is done right and then of course you know what will happen throughout the course of the novel is a series of misadventures a series of very very dire dark consequences that the scientists will have to be accountable for and that of course foregrounds the absent accountability in Mary Shelley's novel which is also a cautionary tale of how science must be integrated organically with ethics with accountability with many other things that make science into a useful holistic social instrument rather than just being a selfish pursuit of knowledge So there are of course other myths, other classical allusions and references in the novel.

Prometheus is not the only myth that Mary used to develop in her theme. Even more noticeable are her many references to the book of Genesis and a lot of biblical references also. What is Garden of Eden and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? The epigraph on the title page of the first edition of Frankenstein in 1818 is taken from John Milton's famous epic poem, Paradise Lost, one of the books from which the creature learns to read. Now, there's a very interesting subtext slash dialogic relationship with Milton. The epitaph in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein has a line from John Milton's Paradise Lost. Ironically and interestingly, Paradise Lost is also one of the texts, one of the works of literature that the creature in Frankenstein's laboratory one of the first books he reads, learns to read and he learns to read from reading Paradise Lost which is a tale of transgression. You know if you remember Paradise Lost, the entire epic written by John Milton is a tale of subversion, transgression and the consequences of transgression, right and appropriately and symbolically enough, very significant symbolically that a creature in Mary Charlotte's Frankenstein learns to read true paradise lost, right? So that's something which, you know, we have to bear in mind. He is a quick study when he reads that Adam and Eve, tempted by Satan to be like God in knowing good and evil, ate of the tree and were exiled from paradise. knowledge led to sorrow and the fall of humankind from the sin of pride or hubris. I have already mentioned hubris that is the ultimate pride which you know pushes a subject to becoming transgressive in quality, breaks the rule, breaks the law and disobeys the older moral principle and the consequences of that defiance and disobedience.

The attentive reader will notice that Victor's Edenic childhood in Geneva is lost when he goes off to university to study science. He laments the loss of his native town in the same way that a creature laments his loss after he learns the godlike science of speech and the science of letters reading. Sorrow only increases with knowledge. Oh that I had forever remained in my native wood, not known or felt beyond the sensations of hunger, thirst and heat. So it's interesting because the transition from the animalistic to the rationalistic is what is happening over here. But what the creature in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein also tells us that he mourns the pure innocence of the animalistic world where the only thing you have to worry about is hunger, thirst and heat. Now with rationality, with the fact that

it has come to read now, now that he can engage with science, he can engage with courts, the science systems which inform story and other kinds of representations. Now it has led him to deal and navigate with more complexity and that has come the cost of innocence. So now he's mourning in a certain sense you know, how the science of reading has increased the sorrow with knowledge, right. So, knowledge comes at a cost. Knowledge comes with this whole idea of, you know, sorrow, because now you can't go back to the world prior to knowledge, the pre-lapsarian world, so to speak, before the fall, right. So rationality over here is also equated with some kind of fall, a fall of innocence, a fall of spiritual innocence, right. This thing is important because this also brings in the idea of transgression in a very subtle subtextual way. Because transgression is not just about the biological, the bioscientific experiments in Frankenstein, it is also about learning to handle and deal and engage with complex science systems. That too becomes a part of the transgressive narrative in Frankenstein, okay.

So, the parallels between Victor's and the creature's statements about the dangers of knowledge draw attention to the doppelganger or double theme of this novel, in which the physical ugliness of the creature reflects the psychological ugliness of its creator Victor, right? So in some sense, the grotesqueness of the creature is an externalization of the grotesqueness of the mind of Victor Frankenstein and that reading is a valid possible reading because the ultimate selfishness of Victor Frankenstein, the ultimate hubris of Victor Frankenstein finds his grotesque shape in a manifestation, the manifested shape in the creature's anatomical design which is why Victor finds the creature so uniquely repulsive because it reminds him, it shows him in a very spectacular you know in a very physical way what is going on in his own mind. So it is a kind of a projection of his own darkness of his own sinister shape, the sinister design and in some way one can also do a comparative reading between Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and something like Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where something similar is happening, right? It's the other way around, of course, with *Dorian Gray*, where the picture, the portrait begins to become more and more grotesque and ugly and gruesome, whereas the physical man, you know, stays absolutely stainless, absolutely, you know, spotless and flawless, right? So, but then again, the picture, the portrait becomes a manifestation of the inner ugliness of

the human subject, right? So something similar happens here. The inner ugliness of Victor Frankenstein gets spectacularly manifested in the creature, the so-called creature, which is why Victor finds it so quote-unquote monstrous in quality. The monstrosity being something which is unacceptable, something which is not just outside the subject-object dialectic, but something which inhabits the abject landscape, the idea of the abject, the rejected. So, as Victor himself expresses that relationship, and there's a quotation from the novel, I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind and endowed with the will and power to effect purposes of horror, such as a deed which he had now done.

Nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit, let loose from the grave and forced to destroy all that was dear to me. So that again, we know in the novel that many people close the victor, they die in the hands of this creature. So, in a way, releasing Frankenstein, releasing the creature is also a release of his inner violence, inner grotesque violence and that obviously comes to consume him, not just in physical corporeal ways, but also psychologically, in very mental psychological ways. If man was made in God's image, it's only appropriate that a creature will be made in the image of a psychologically disfigured creator, right? So Victor's disfigurement, you know, the deformed mind that he has, finds his manifestation in the hideous shape of the creature. one whose head or reason has destroyed his heart or emotions in the persons of Elizabeth and Clerval. So, many people, including Elizabeth, who was Victor's fiancée, Henry Clerval, who was Victor's best friend, they all die in the hands of this creature. And that's something which we find throughout the novel. And there is a diagram which should be on your screen. A diagram helps to demonstrate the symbolic relations among all the major characters as they externalize Victor's internal conflict. So, we have Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein and the creature. So that is the head bit and then we have the heart bit, Margaret, Walton, Savile, Elizabeth Lavenza, Henry Cleveland and then the female creature, right. So there is this interesting, you know, analogy one can make between the head and the heart over here and of course as you can see that the head belongs to the male, the heart belongs to the female, the very stereotypical division which take place. Now, we'll stop at this point today, but we will continue next time. We'll look at how so many female subjects are attacked and destroyed in the novel and there's so much violence directed at the female subject. And that

again the violence which is unleashed in the female subjects, it also becomes a very grotesque and very crude representation of the innate violence inside Victor Frankenstein's mind.

And that is what makes him uncomfortable. That is what makes him cringe and shock. Because he gets to see what's happening inside his own brain, because he creates a monster, he creates this creature. And that the monstrosity of the creature is in a way a manifestation of his own innate monstrosity, right? There is some truth in the statement that the creature, the monster is Victor Frankenstein, right? Because, you know, in a way they are projections of each other. right. So, you know what happens inside Victor Frankenstein's head gets manifest in his grotesque body in the form of the quote unquote monster which is what makes a novel such a complex psychological novel along with the physical violence, the corporeal violence. The psychological violence in a novel is also very deep, very dark and very disturbing. So we will stop at this point today and we continue with the session in the next class. Thank you for your attention.