

Course Name: The Novel and Change

Professor Name: Dr. Avishek Parui

Department Name: Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Institute Name: IIT Madras

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Lecture 16

Frankenstein - Part 5

Hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We will continue discussion on Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein. So we ended the last session looking at or just beginning to talk about the violence in a novel and how the violence should be seen. It's not just at a corporeal way, but also in a very psychological process. And a large part of the violence in the novel is directed towards the female subject. So, there are a lot of women who died or killed brutally, tragically in the novel but also the psychological violence here, the entire desire, the entire ambition to replace a woman from the process of procreation may also be seen as an act of violence. So, the epistemic psychological violence parallels in many ways the physical function of violence which happens in the novel. Now those of you who read the novel would know that there's a point in the story where the creature, the male creature, he demands a female partner and he promises Victor that they will go and live separately in a different part of the world. If Victor creates a female partner for him and he will not disturb quote unquote normal human civilization. But of course, in the process of creating the female partner Victor destroys it you know he has this moment of realization or this moment of you know psychological encounter where he thinks that you know what if the monster the creature does not keep their promise what if they come back and begin to haunt human civilization even more. What if the children of this union you know come back and they don't keep the promise. So this causes a lot of dilemma in his head and he ends up destroying the female creature. So this should be on your screen. once Victor destroys the female creature it is inevitable that a creature himself will destroy Elizabeth and Clover. So there is a chain of violence which is released after this point. In effect the novel ends the night that Victor constructs his creature and the rest of the plot

merely literalizes and externalizes Victor's self-destructive acts when he rules love out of his heart and in the form of the monstrous self, kills Elizabeth and Clerval in what may be read as an act of suicide, right? So in a way, Victor can be held directly responsible for the many deaths in the novel, for many tragic, brutal killings in the novel. This reading of Frankenstein is but one among the many that this novel allows. So it is a very complex novel as I hope to establish already. So it allows for different readings. Some of the readings might contradict each other but that is the beauty, the complexity, the tribute to the legacy the novel has achieved over centuries.

Victor constructing this monstrous creature may also be read as political science or political philosophers creating the destructive French Revolution or the science of natural philosophy creating the dehumanizing Industrial Revolution. So if you remember at the beginning of this course we mentioned the two big political backdrops in the novel, one being the French Revolution, the other being the Industrial Revolution. So the French Revolution may be seen as unleashing of this euphoria was very quickly converted into a reign of terror, very quickly converted into an absolute violence. the big political promise, the big political revolution, the big political euphoria very quickly deformed or degenerated into something absolutely macabre in quality, almost apocalyptic in quality.

So, that ambivalence between euphoria and paranoia, that ambivalence between the promise of a new revolution, new world order. and the recycling of pure orders of terror is in any historical reading of the French Revolution and that forms a very spectral backdrop of the novel, that's very much part of the novel in terms of the political backdrop. Likewise, the Industrial Revolution which is also there happening at that time where we have the whole idea of the technology coming up and replacing humans and facilitating human work, but also in the process dehumanizing the human, alienating the human. So the sense of alienation, the sense of commodification, the sense of distancing from the human that also begins to happen during Industrial Revolution. So again we have a very complex interplay of euphoria and paranoia of this sort of promise of productive possibility and the entire acceptance of an apocalyptic horror. So that ambivalence continues throughout Mary Shelley's novel. Yet Another reading of the novel is that it is about the creating of the novel

itself. So the meta reading of the novel is that it is also about writing that novel, right. An act of writing which is also an act of destruction because you are writing about destruction in a certain sense. Just as Victor assembles bones and muscles and sinews and other body parts of his creature So also Mary assembled the words and images and symbols and punctuation of a novel. So, the entire novel could also be seen as a body, as an organic body with muscles and tissues and fibers and nerves brought together. So, the stitching of the story as it were, that also takes place. So that reading is also valid reading. the parallel or the analogy between building a creature, building an organism in a very metonymic way by bringing together different bones, different muscles, different fibers and constructing the story, the plot by bringing together many different components that parallel may also be valid. To make this point, she used birthday metaphors in her introduction to the 1831 edition.

She did dilate upon, so very hideous an idea. I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper. I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days. So look at this very biological birthday metaphor. So it's almost like the parent giving birth to a child. And of course, it's a very complex child because it's not a child which is but rather an inglorious child. Now, there is some, you know, biographical details one has to bear in mind. Those happy days involved collaboration with Percy Shelley in 1816 and 1817 when the novel was written. And there was a lesson to STEM students in the facts about of that collaboration, which is often essential for most scientific discovery. As I've outlined in other publications, Percy edited Mary's novel, suggesting that she expand a shorter version of it into the novel we now read. In the margins of the draft manuscript, advising about some of the plot, rewriting parts of the concluding pages as a fair copy of the draft into the pages that would be submitted to the publisher. Advising her about transforming her 33-chapter draft into a 23-chapter fair copy. and writing at least 5,000 of the 72,000 words of this novel. So it is very much a collaborative work. So it's interesting to see how, though it was authored by Mary Shelley, it was also stitched together, as it were, in collaboration with her husband. In general, Mary relied on Percy for some of her accomplishments in the first edition of the novel she published on 1 January 1818. In doing so, she implicitly honoured the character of Clerval. who, as a social scientist and linguist, staying in Geneva

to honour his father's wishes and leaving there with the hopes of pursuing his own education, only to end up nursing Victor, offers an example to the reader. Clerval, whose science involves other people, social sciences. So again, we look at two different kinds of sciences.

One is the more self-centred, selfish, natural sciences, where there's one man exploring nature, chemicals, different biological processes. The others are more collaborative, more egalitarian social sciences, where, you know, you're working with other people, for other people, science about other people. So, Clerval offers an example to the reader. Clerval, whose science involves other people, does not isolate himself as Victor does in his pursuit of knowledge. As Victor describes him later, Clerval, beloved friend, He was a being formed in the very poetry of nature. So again, look at how poetry becomes the holistic spiritual succor where people come together, inform each other, shape each other, heal each other in very organic ways. His wild and enthusiastic imagination was chastened by the sensibility of his heart. It is likely that Percy wrote these words in a late addition to the proofs of the novel and the reference to imagination, the head or reason chastened or directed by the heart, will help bring this introduction to what I hope is an illuminating end. Now, introduction obviously is coming to an end, but we can see how towards the end, the editors are bringing together the really collaborative textual process through which the novel was created. And imagination is a very important element, a very important integrative element in Romantic, in writing, Romantic literature, as you know. The biggest factor of imagination, the biggest function of imagination. So, if you read Coleridge, for example, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the big Romantic poets who theorized imagination in a very sophisticated way, where he talked about primary imagination, secondary imagination and fancy. Now he said the highest form of imagination is integrative in quality, right, in the sense that it will integrate different components and produce something which is more than the sum of the parts. The totality that it achieves is, It transcends some of its parts. It is more than mathematical.

It is more than just a piece of fragment. So, it is stitching together and yet creating something which is more than the bits stitched together. So there's a spirit that is infused

with imagination. And this infusion of spirit is the integrative aspect that Coleridge celebrated or lauded as the finest form of imagination. And that's something which we see happening in Mary Shelley's novel as well. So, and Coleridge is referred to unsurprisingly now, the chastened or creative imagination is at the heart of English Romanticism and its various definitions somehow involve or evolve from the famous and short 13th chapter of *Biographia Literaria* in 1817 by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in which he simply states that the primary imagination is a living power and the prime agent of all human perception. So, the highest form of faculty, the living power, the moving power, the prime agent of all human perception is primary imagination. And a reputation in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. So the primary imagination is a process of which the finite mind can connect to the infinite process of creation. So that was a very transcendental theoretical principle that was at work. Just as God ontologically created or fashioned the universe from chaotic matter, so also does the human mind or imagination epistemologically create its own universe from the chaotic sensory data that a person receives from the external man, external world. So, the whole idea of the sensory input, the bombardment of sensory inputs which come in the brain, they all get integrated in a fine form through the process of imagination, which is why imagination is such an important faculty for romantic poetry, for romantic literature, because it integrates, it creates, it transcends, it transfuses, it transmutes, and it transports. So this very kinetic quality of imagination, the transcendental quality of imagination is why the romantic poets theorize so heavily on it. So man is not God, although Victor tries to be, that is his ultimate hubris, he wants to be God, he wants to replace God, rather man is like unto God in each and every one of the creative perceptions that take place every second of a human being's existence. What this means is we never know the thing in itself. We know only our creative constructs of a thing.

Percy Shelley put it most bluntly. Nothing exists but as it perceived. So the entire thing, we never get to see the real world. We just know the real world through our perceptions of reality. So, what is real is our perception. And that's something which also was theorized by Percy Shelley. and all things exist as they are perceived. These statements mean that for Percy Shelley, rather than ontology of theory of being, determining of what our

epistemology or theory of knowledge might be, epistemology is primary or privileged in all human experience. is in a way prioritizing epistemology over ontology because the only way to access something ontological is through the epistemological framework, through the experiential framework. So that experience becomes primary and the entity becomes secondary. So, experience over entity, epistemology over ontology. So it is also in a very interesting way, it is a very Kantian framework. If you the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the whole idea of noumenon phenomenon. So, nomenon being the ontic entity, phenomenon being the experiential affective engagement with that entity and phenomenon becomes important over here because the only way we can access reality is through our senses and the only way we can integrate the senses is through imagination. So, we come towards the end of the introduction. So, what does Frankenstein do? So, what is the integrated principle that Frankenstein offers us along with the cautionary tale? This Frankenstein and his introduction encourage STEM students to respect the humanities as offering a valid means of defining and even improving the world, the moral principle of imagination, improving the world. As much as science hopes to do. Frankenstein is certainly not the only work of art that addresses these issues, but it has become a metaphor for science that ignores human consequences and values. Right, so it also becomes a very interesting metaphor for that kind of science which operates by ignoring human values and the dire consequences of that science.

And we know it very, very well today. So every day, some blog or newspaper or magazine or book or movie or television show alludes to Frankenstein in order to describe science gone bad. So Frankenstein becomes a metaphor of science gone bad, mismanaged science, the misadventure in science, the science gone awry, science gone south, any of the pop metaphors you can think of. But that becomes a very constant reminder. The word Frankenstein itself has become a metaphor. In popular culture and folk psychology of bad science right of evil science the science gone wrong right so that is the in a way that also corroborates the legacy as a tribute to the lasting legacy of Mary Shelley's novel. But these allusions to the evils of science can teach us much more, much about our human condition. In fact, some recent Frankenstein-inspired moving pictures actually show a non-human being gaining respect for human life and human values. So, again the whole difference

between human and non-human has disappeared or become very problematic over the years and you know the references over here, the conclusion over here is mentioning two very, very interesting films, should be on the screen, James Cameron's Terminator 2, A Judgement Day. and one television series called Person of Interest, which is again relying on dramatizing the artificial intelligence machine. So I mentioned towards the beginning how this particular novel by Mary Shelley is actually very, very deeply resonant with the whole debate about artificial intelligence and accountability, and how in our euphoria or paranoia about artificial intelligence we should actually be very, very careful about looking at AI, looking at the ethics around AI, something which is absolutely an integrative aspect and the integration of accountability and ethics, integration of ethics, accountability and sciences is perhaps more resonant or more relevant today than when Mary Shelley first wrote this novel, right. So, towards the end, we find out that the last, you know, paragraph, the last bit of the introduction, electricity, technology and the Frankenstein myth seem to have come full circle at this moment of the plot, right. So there is a reference to a person of interest that, you know, has been brought about over here. But even in modern plots we find all these different scientific discourses, the misadventures of science, the selfishness, the unaccountability of science, all these things come, still very heavily invested in the modern epics, in the modern narratives about, you know, about science. From Benjamin Franklin's kites and electrical storms to Joseph Priestley's history of electricity that led to late 18th century and early 19th century scientific experiments to Frankenstein to Hollywood adaptations of Frankenstein that use lightning to power the electrical machines that generate the creature and to the most recent adaptations that feature computers and codes and algorithms and hard drives and a final apocalyptic machine on which the fate of the world depends. So even modern apocalyptic tales of horror, of microchips, of different kinds of machines which can go wrong, the rise of the machines, the takeover of the machines, the fear of the machines, They keep going back to the Frankensteinian myth, the original story, right, in which this very selfish and very, very egocentric, hubristic scientist desires to create a world order, which will replace the old world order, sublimate in something else, and then that becomes monstrous, it becomes a horrible experiment gone wrong. And then a scientist will have to invest all his energy to destroy what he has created, which brings to our mind again the very thin line between absolute destruction and absolute

creation, which is also the moral principle underlining, you know, the entire atom bomb discourse and also something which is very heavily invested in contemporary narratives, contemporary theories, cultural stories, cultural narratives about AI, accountability and ethics. So with that we end the introduction of Frankenstein. I hope this has been you know something which has given you a bit of a template to draw on as we move into more detailed descriptions, more detailed passages from the novel which we will from the subsequent sessions. Thank you for your attention.