

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Lecture 19

Frankenstein - Part 8

So, hello and welcome to this nptel course titled the novel and change we're looking at this alfred northman essay uh undisturbed by reality we already had had a session on this uh this is obviously reading Mary Shelley's frankenstein and looking at the whole nature of reality and unreality and how the science in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is actually pre-modern and in that sense it is departing from the contemporary concerns and templates of science and going back to a magical world of magical promises of alchemical aspirations and all the rest of it. Now in this essay and this part of the essay which we will conclude with today we look at how this unrestrained of Victor Frankenstein actually causes a downfall and that is exactly what creates this ruin in the novel because Obviously, he's not following the templates of rationality, which will keep him, which would have kept him through some checks and balance mechanism. But because it's unchecked, there's absolute hubris of creating a different world order altogether, which is, in a way, also using the vocabulary of a pre-modern, pre-scientific paradigm. And that's something which we're underlining here. so this should be on your screen unrestrained by cowardice and carelessness victor pursues his inquiries obsessively so there's something obsessive and almost fetishistic about the way he pursues science it was the most beautiful season never did the fields bestow a more plentiful harvest or the vines yield a more luxuriant vintage. But my eyes were insensible to the charms of nature.

In more ways than one, through the obsessive gaze the world takes on a dual aspect. To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death. I became acquainted with the science of anatomy, but this was not sufficient. I must also observe the natural decay and corruption of the human body. So, there is this... really cyclical nature in Victor's

pursuit of knowledge, where he's looking at life and lifelessness, abundance and decadence together. So, nothing is what it seems is a chimera-like quality. The lively charms of nature harbour decay and corruption. What is naturally given is a promise or sign of what chemitechnologically and lifeless matter is imbued by a mind, whereas our brain for climate change is a mere machine. When things take on such a dual aspect, when they're not what they appear to be, but endowed with secret powers, they become uncanny. This is the point that I want to spend some time with today in this session, the whole idea of uncanny. Of course, uncanny, as some of you know, I'm sure most of you are aware, is a Freudian term. I mean, it has become very, very famous after Freud. whole idea of unheimlich or strange but also there is a spatial quality about uncanny it is something outside the home outside the familiar space hence it's spatial and the territory very very territorial quality but uncanny is what makes them makes the entire concept so organically connected to transgression right so uncanny in a certain sense is also de-territorialization. It is outside a territorialized space, territorialized understanding of reality. So it's a form of de-territorialization, a form of unsettling, a form of defamiliarization, which creates or produces this sense of strangeness. And in a way, it is also connected to transgression. So, transgression, territoriality, defamiliarizations, all these come together in a very triangulated way to dramatize the uncanny in Mary Shelley's novel. Now, of course, there's a Freudian vocabulary which informs our understanding of the uncanny. So this is a starting point for Sigmund Freud's famous analysis of the uncanny. Quoting Eric Rensch, Freud notes that, and I quote, in telling a story, one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton, right? So, this interplay between the animate and inanimate is something that Freud advocates from a narrative position.

So, you know, the idea over here being that if you really want to create a sense of mystery, a sense of suspense, leave a certain degree of uncertainty about whether the entity is human or non-human, animated or inanimated, human or automated. Or one might add, whether that figure in lifeless matter from the graveyard or a living being. Now, this, as you can imagine by now, this is absolutely blurred in Mary Shelley's novel because what Victor Franklinton does is that it creates a new order of life by stitching together, literally stitching together limbs and tissues and muscles. that he picks up from different corpse houses and

graveyards. So essentially, and quite literally and organically, he creates life out of dead matter, right? So he goes to the dead places or graveyards and cemeteries and picks up those things, limbs and corpses and the dead bodies, and then bring it all together in order to bring it all together and create this supernatural life order. So, there is again this very problematic proximity between life and death, between cyclicity and decadence in Mary Shelley's novel. So, today it is not just the robots and zombies in the movies, but also the devices that surround us that Freud explains instill doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive, or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate. So the understanding of animation has obviously been problematized in the modern world, the contemporary world we live in today. But this seems to have been anticipated by Freud in a certain sense, that that liminal gap between the living and the non-living, between, you know, between the animate and inanimate is something that he advocates as a sense of creating mystery, a scheme of creating mystery. Consider, for example, the ambition to create ambient intelligence in smart environments. As we move through the world, so the whole idea of virtual reality, interactive reality, immersive reality, augmented reality, so all these things, the vocabulary, the experiential quality of animation that we have in today, it doesn't necessarily come from the organic order. It can be also something plastic, something technological, super technological.

That creates what we now call ambient intelligence or artificial intelligence. So this is basically situating Frankenstein in the world we live in today and really revealing the relevance of Mary Shelley's novel, which is written in 1818. So what happens in the novel? How does it travel in a very semantic, symbolic, metaphorical way? And how is it still so relevant in the world we live today, the world we internalize today? As we move through the world, A network of sensors would collect background information about the quality of air. It would attach Wikipedia entries to the streets and houses we pass. It would signal the presence of friends, charging stations, and goods. So, the whole idea of ambient intelligence, what is around us, our sense of reality, our ecological reality has been completely de-territorialized in the world we live in today. And this de-territorialized understanding of ecological reality is important. And again, it helps us sort of dial back to Frankenstein in order to understand one of the first fictional experiments to understand the

difference between living and non-living and how the living can be made out of non-living matter. which is in a very interesting way quite dialogic with the whole idea of creating this smart life or smart intelligence out of dead matter. This world would be a magical one in which all things are endowed with meaning subject to our wishes, which may be granted if we conjure the powers properly not by praying, but by speaking to them or choosing the right app.

So again, this very app-based understanding of reality, ambient reality, this has a very interesting relevance in our reading of Frankenstein today, in our reinterpretation of Frankenstein. With ambient intelligence and ubiquitous computing, the natural environment takes on a dual aspect and aided by modern science and technology, we advance into a pre-modern animistic world. So this is the temporal ambivalence that the essay is trying to highlight. So in a certain sense, the post-modern is also pre-modern because what we see today, this is a post-modern idea of converting dead matter into super matter, into, you know, inanimate order into a super intelligent order is in a very strange sense comparable to the vocabulary of alchemy, comparable to the idea and function of alchemy, which also aspired to create gold out of mundane matter, mundane material. So the alchemical vocabulary finds its way back in a post-algorithmic, post-ambient intelligence world, right? So, in that sense, just like Frankenstein or the experiment in Frankenstein tries to create a post-contemporary order by using our pre-modern scientific method. So, similarly, similarly the current concerns about technology and algorithms and artificial intelligence and ambient intelligence seem to share a lot of sentimental vocabulary or sentimental structures with the pre-modern idea and aspiration around alchemy and you know that kind of a scientific method. So contemporary technoscience is undisturbed by reality. So again, it can create realities, undisturbed by reality. It can co-create and hyper-create and recreate reality. It can flaunt its inventions that surpass the limited vocabulary of forms and shapes in nature. So, it's not constrained by the templates of time, by the templates of space and time and rationality. It is undisturbed by reality in that it draws on scientific understanding to generate a degree of complexity that exceeds the natural intellectual power of human minds. That it is undisturbed by reality in that it creates monsters. So again, the whole idea of monstrosity, which accounts for the paranoia around

artificial intelligence, that, you know, it is something which is a sublime as well as a monstrous order of creation.

It is something supernatural outside the home, unhomely, hence uncanny. So, this sort of re-specialization of science is important over here. It is outside the rational understanding, the rational navigation with reality. And how so? Lifeless things that appear to be animated by a mind or a soul, as well as lively, talkative and animated things. The whole idea of interactive machines, which are actually lifeless in a certain sense, but also they create memory, they create animation, they create emotion with what is called ambient intelligence, right? So animated machines that are merely machines. So again, we have this man-machine assemblage and these entangled qualities, what exactly this essay is highlighting. And as we are learning to live and interact with such monsters, there is nothing particularly terrible or frightening about them, although they are sometimes a bit unsettling, uncanny, leaving us unsure just what and who we are dealing with, whom we eat, when we eat genetically modified foods, when we talk to our cell phones, when we watch a computer generate on screen the right path of a hurricane. When you try to imagine what we call, what we wait all the time through a sea of information laden radio waves or surrounded by electrical wiring in every room of every house. So this constant engagement with super-nature, this constant engagement with ambient intelligence is something which is not just getting more and more familiarizing but also domesticated in a world we live in today. So in that sense the novel Frankenstein seems to anticipate this domestication because you know what happens in novel is a grotesque form of monstrosity is formed but cut back in 2024 And if you sequence it that way, we find that that form of monstrosity is getting domesticated, is getting ubiquitous in our understanding of reality. In fact, it is almost impossible to understand reality without the mediation of machines in the world we live in today.

So, dreams of material science, of information and communication, of technology, of biomedical research, of synthetic biology seek to overcome or transgress the limits of a given world with an almost supernatural enthusiasm. In the midst of the story, it might be worthwhile to pause and reflect only to discover, as Victor did, that I am moralizing in the

most interesting part of my tale, and that is the quotation from the novel. A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquillity. I do not think that a pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. Yet a study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful. That is to say, not befitting the human mind. So part of the cautionary tale in Frankenstein is to look at unhealthy science. And you can see how the sense of hygiene, which is calibrated over here, what is hygienic science as opposed to what is unhygienic science. And with the idea of unhygiene and non-hygiene, We can attach other attributes such as, you know, let's say, forbidden, transgressive, illegal, not sanctioned and potentially dangerous and risky and precarious and all the rest of it. But what this entire novel does is to see how porous the boundaries are between hygienic and unhygienic.

And how ambition or overreaching can actually blur away or problematize the parameters between the known and the unknown, between the permitted and the non-permitted. which is something which you see happening in real level in the technoscientific, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence and algorithms in the world we live in today. So in an age of technoscience, this is the last bit, in the age of technoscience, it has become quite difficult even to understand this injunction. So again, like you said, The novel itself arcs or gives you this moral parameter or perimeter and then problematizes it. It deconstructs the dualistic idea of life and death, of life-giving and life-taking because you see that happening at the same time in Frankenstein. And that, in a way, seems to anticipate much of what we internalize and live today. So our lived reality is almost always mediated by technoscience or artificial intelligence or ambient intelligence, which begs the question that the idea or the difference, ontological difference between natural intelligence and artificial intelligence is very blurry today. So the question is, the ethical question is, the existential question is, are we supposed to achieve perfection merely by taking pleasure in unadulterated things that are unspoiled by excessive ambition? The dispassionate scientist describes things peacefully as they are, no matter what good or ill they signify. But, and this is the catch over here, but there is no such tranquility when Victor, Or one of her

contemporary techno scientists seek to perfect his or her powers on a dreary night of November. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. So, the ancient ambition of creating life, the ancient ambition of creating something magical out of the mundane, that ambition finds new forms, new gadgets, new technology, new shapes, new structures, and different diachronic movements across human history, right? So, you know, it was alchemy once upon a time. It was, you know, different kinds of chemical interventions when Viktor Frankenstein is working. And it's definitely the case with algorithms and artificial intelligence in the world we live in today.

Now, what this essay does, is it historicizes the ancient ambition of creating super life out of mundane matter. It historicizes or it gives you a trajectory, a diagram, a dichronic diagram in terms of how this attribute or aspiration or desire to create something better, something more sublime finds its way through different forms, different substances at different points of time. And in that, the novel is profoundly historical, but also it evokes a sense of a mythical status, in a way is also timeless. And the timelessness of Frankenstein is also the plasticity of Frankenstein, in a way that it finds itself in different forms and different devices and different mediums of representation. So it has had multiple spin-offs in cinema. It has had multiple spin-offs in narrative form as well. And the plasticity and the timelessness of Frankenstein gives it or give it a historical as well as an archetypal quality. And the archetypal quality is connected to the ancient attribute, the ancient aspiration, the ancient desire, one of the most primitive desires of human imagination. to create something better than what it is around, what is around the subject, to create something more sublime, something more transcendental, something more magical, right? And this attempt to create something magical out of the mundane, the attempt to create something supernatural out of the natural, finds this, you know, very interesting voice in Mary Shelley's novel, which is also a cautionary tale. But the reason why we keep reading it today, the reason why we keep going back to the novel today is because you find this very rich resonance, materialist resonance, technoscientific resonance in the entire idea of AI and nanotechnology and technoscience and biogenetics that are getting more and more ubiquitous, more and more normative in a world we live in today.

So, with that, we end this essay. We'll have one session more, one more essay on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, with which we'll wind up a reading of the text. But what I'm hoping to achieve in these readings is to look at the way in which the text and the context are constantly maybe connected with each other. And perhaps more than any other novel in this course, we find that it is perhaps most rewarding to contemporize *Frankenstein* and the scientific, technological, ethical debates that we find ourselves engaging with today. So with that, we conclude this essay and move on to another essay in a subsequent session. Thank you for your attention.