

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Frankenstein - Part 9

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We will start with a new essay today on Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, which will look at the relationship between Frankenstein, gender and Mother Nature. It's a very famous essay by Anne Malone, which is part of this edition that we are reading for the purpose of this course. So as you can imagine from the very title of the essay, it looks at the very interesting and complex triangulation between the text, the aspect and function of gender, and of course the engagement with nature. And one of the many interesting things this essay does is look at how nature is essentially feminized in the novel. We talked about this very to some extent and also the entire gaze towards nature is from a very, very masculinist position, a position of hubris, a position of cohesion, a position of control. And we see how this gets played out not just in Victor Frankenstein's experiments with bioscience and procreation and the entire biological apparatus, the technological slash biological apparatus, but also in his equally arrogant quest, the arrogant adventure to conquer the Arctic seas, which is the beginning of the novel, right, which is how the ultimate narrator of the Chinese box story is set out to do. Find out the secret passage through which the Arctic seas can be conquered. So again, we can look at the vocabulary over here, the idea of conquering nature, conquering biological processes, is also a very, very hubristic way, and we talked about hubris already, a very hubristic way in which this very masculinist gaze is directed at. So, this particular essay by Anne Mellon talks about this extensively. So, we'll read this in some details. Frankenstein, Gender and Mother Nature. On 16th June, Bloomsday, on 16th June 1816, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin gave birth to one of the enduring myths of modern civilization. The narrative of the scientist who single-handedly creates a new species, a humanoid form that need not die. So the whole idea of creating a super species,

something more sublime, something more beautiful, more potent than the human nature is part of the original aspiration in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

In her novel *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* in 1818, Victor Frankenstein robs both cemeteries and slaughterhouses in order to such a together a creature composed of dead animal and human body parts. creature he then animates with the spark of being. We talked about how the organism is quite literally and symbolically stitched together, such it, you know, tied together through stitches and then given a spark, you know, animated to the spark of being, essentially breathed into, right. So the soul of the creature wakes up, gets animated. In doing so, he claims he has renewed life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption, So the whole hubris over here is directed against death, right. So, to create something deathless in quality, create something which will never be subject to decadence, subject to the original organic form of creation and destruction. He wants to create an order, a biological, super biological order which is situated outside of the cyclical quality of generation, regeneration and degeneration, right. Victor thus realises the age-old wish of humankind to transcend mortality, to become a god. Now we talked about already how this wish of Victor Frankenstein, this aspiration of Victor Frankenstein is a very ancient aspiration to conquer death, to conquer mortality, to transcend time and to become timeless, to become god. Because to become god in a sense is to become timeless, you know, to be not subjected to by the trials and tribulations and decadence of time.

Unlike Prometheus, who in ancient myth both shapes the human species out of clay and then steals fire from the Olympian gods to give to man, Victor expects to be revered, even worshipped. This is the original masculinist hubris. In the novel, he wants to create a super species which will keep worshipping him as a father, as a creator. He wants to replace God and become God in a certain sense. But in his hubristic quest to become God, to create an immortal species, Victor constructs a creature that eventually destroys his life, his wife, his best friend, and his baby brother, so exhausting Victor that he dies at an early age. So, as you know already, that this is a scientific experiment which goes terribly wrong. It goes completely awry. And in the process of creation, he ends up, you know, opening up, unleashing a really destructive cycle, which, you know, basically kills his, you know, closest people, including his wife, his brother, and leading him to his untimely death,

premature death. Mary Shelley's novel has thus become the paradigm for every scientific effort to harness the uncontrollable powers of nature and the unintended consequences that those efforts have produced, be they nuclear fission, genetic engineering, stem cell cloning or bioterrorism. So, we keep saying how this novel is richly and uniquely relevant today in terms of how there are similar scientific experiments which often operate without accountability, which often operate without any ethics or any ethical concern.

And they go on to spiral into something potentially very, very dangerous, potentially precarious. So in the effort to produce possibilities, they produce precarity, they end up producing precarity. And this very thin line between possibility and precarity has been part of the moral dilemma, part of the ethical dilemma around science, which is why the entire ambivalence around the morality of science, the entire ambivalence around the accountability of science, these are things which are, which opened up and dramatized to a large extent in Mary Charlize Frankenstein, which is also a text which is a scathing critique, a feminist critique with entire male masculinist idea of controlling nature, controlling biological processes and controlling creation, procreation, reproduction, navigation, etc. The popular conflation of the scientist with his creation, such that Frankenstein has as often the name of the creature as of his makeup, only points to a profound understanding of Mary's novel, in which Victor finally becomes as filled with hatred, revenge, and the desire to destroy as a creature he hunts across the Arctic waste. So, this is a very popular mistake, which is actually not a mistake. It's quite appropriately and symbolically true, which is to look at Frankenstein, the figure Frankenstein, as a monster. So in normal popular vocabulary, you find that the word Frankenstein means the monster, whereas in reality, the textual reality here is that Frankenstein, obviously the scientist who creates the monster, the monster doesn't have a name, but it has acquired a kind of a symbolic currency through which it's actually an appropriate reading to look at the creator of Frankenstein as the monster, in terms of how he ends up creating the monstrosity which is inside him. And we have already discussed how the quote unquote grotesqueness of the monster may be seen as an externalization of what is inside Victor's own mind, an externalization of his own grotesque ambitions, grotesque aspirations to go beyond the you know, the ken, the permissible ken, right? So there is an innate

transgressive quality about Frankenstein and the monster which he ends up creating as part of his transgressive mind. So it is quite appropriate symbolically to actually refer to Viktor Frankenstein as a monster, which is done sometimes in popular discourses. The novel implicitly suggests an alternative.

Had Victor Frankenstein taken responsibility for his creation, had he loved, nurtured and disciplined his creature, he might have created the superior species of which he dreamed. So we talked about how this is science minus accountability, science minus ethics and how this decoupling of between science and accountability, between science and ethics can lead to disastrous consequences and the novel begs the question What if the situation was different? What if Victor Frankenstein actually paid more attention to accountability? What if Victor Frankenstein, the creator, was more aware of the ethical implications of what he was creating? Maybe we would have had a different story. We would have had a more holistic, a more nurturing story instead of what we ended up getting in this novel. Among other things, the novel is also about the anxiety of parenting, the anxiety of creation, the anxiety of raising a child. And there are some very interesting and disturbing, deeply disturbing biographical details which we must take into account in terms of the number of miscarriages Mary Shelley had, the tragedy she experienced in terms of the process of becoming a mother. And these details also come in in a very interesting way to give us an additional layer of the way in which we interpret the story of Frankenstein. And these are questions which this essay is engaged with. These are very direct questions which this essay is asking. So how does this 18-year-old woman come up with this magnificent story, this deeply moving story which haunts us even to this day in 2024? And it almost becomes some kind, there are very few stories, very few novels written in, let's say, 17th, 18th, 19th centuries, which have acquired the currency of the archetype. So Frankenstein has become an archetype. So, the moment to save Frankenstein is a metaphor or something. a metaphor of transgression, it's a metaphor of going beyond the limits, it's a metaphor of creating something which becomes monstrous in quality. So there is this archetypal currency about Frankenstein, the archetypal quality about Frankenstein. The same goes for Robinson Crusoe to a certain extent.

The moment you say Robinson Crusoe, it has become so important and so powerful in collective imagination that it almost becomes a metaphor of this transgressive, overreaching sailor. A similar kind of transgression and overreaching take place here as well. So this is an important question. How did the 18-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, later Shelley, come to write a tale so present of modern science? Two years earlier, on 28th July, 1814, Mary had left her home in London to go to France with the married poet, Percy Shelley. Seven months later, she gave birth prematurely to a baby girl called Clara, who lived only two weeks. These are the personal tragedies that may have shaped the writing of Frankenstein. After which she had a recurring dream that her little baby came to life again. There had been only cold that she erupted before the fire and lived. Immediately pregnant again, Mary gave birth to her son William on 24 January 1816. Four months later, Mary, Percy and her stepsister Claire left England to join Claire's new lover Lord Byron and his doctor John William Polidori in Geneva. kept indoors by the coldest summer in a century, following the eruption of the volcano Tambora in the Indonesian archipelago in April 1815. So, there was this massive volcanic eruption in Indonesia, which forced people to stay indoors even during summer. And this happened to be the coldest summer, you know, for a long time. Which, through the volcanic eruption, threw so much debris into the stratosphere that the sun was literally blocked out across India, Europe, and North America. So they ended up reading ghost stories for their amusement. The four friends decided on 16 June 1816 to have a contest to see who could write the most frightening story.

So as you know already, the novel Frankenstein emerged from a ghost story writing competition, something which sounds very trivial, but this is the background. The reason why these people were locked up in their homes because this massive, you know, volcanic waste that erupted from Tambora, an Indonesian archipelago, which literally blocked the sky. So there's nothing that people could do outside. So, they had to stay indoors and which is why they had to come up with some way to pass the time. So, write a ghost story. So enter a ghost story competition in which Frankenstein essentially was an entry. That night that Mary had awakened dream or reverie that provided the germ of Frankenstein, Born from Mary's own deepest pregnancy anxieties, what if I give birth to a monster? Could I

ever wish to kill my own child? Her novel brilliantly explores what happens when a man attempts to have a baby without a woman. So, as we discussed already, part of the ambition in Victor Frankenstein's scientific imagination is to do away with a woman, is to replace a woman with a bioscientific apparatus through which a progeny can be created. through which procreation can happen. So we don't need a woman to carry out procreation anymore. So, there is something deeply misogynistic, something deeply masculinist about the whole ambition, about the whole aspiration in the novel. So the novel brilliantly explores what happens when a man attempts to have a baby without a woman. So Victor Frankenstein immediately abandons his creature. Why an Abundant and Unloved Creature Becomes a Monster, the Predictable Consequences of a Day's Cutting-Edge Research in Chemistry, Physics, and Electricity, most notably the experiments conducted by Erasmus Darwin, Humphrey Davy, and Louis Galvani, and the Violent Aftermath of the French Revolution. So we had already discussed how there's a whole range of scientific and political narratives and conditions around the time, which may have supplied the backdrop of Mary Shelley's novel.

And, you know, the novel can be situated very squarely and very complexly in this particular backdrop. So it is quite literally a novel about change, about change in political order, a change in political scientific orders, and so on and so forth. Mary drew psychologically on her own childhood experiences of isolation and abandonment after her mother's death in childbirth and her father's remarriage to a hostile stepmother to articulate the creature's overwhelming desire for a family, a mate of his own, and the consequences of his violent anger when he is rejected by all whom he approaches, even an innocent young boy, William Frankenstein, modelled on William Shelley. and then his makeup. So, this constant rejection transformed the subject into the abject and we discussed already how the birth of the abject in Mary Shelley's novel is also the birth of monstrosity. So, the constant discrimination, humiliation, segregation that he faces, the quote-unquote creature faces are exactly what makes him an abject entity from being a subject entity. So he has a cognitive intellectual powers to become a supreme subject, a superior subject but he ends up becoming an abject and that is his tragedy and that is how from this tragedy emerges the monstrosity in the novel. Right. By including an image of the murder of her own son

William in the novel, Mary articulated that her deepest fear that an unloved and psychologically abused child such as she herself had been could become an unloving abusive mother, even a murdering monster. So among other things, Frankenstein may also be read as a novel about neglect, as a novel about abuse, as a novel about abandonment, right? So a child is abandoned, a child is abused, a child is neglected.

So, what happens when a neglected child, an abused child, you know, grows with this anger, this vengeance and this deep sense of humiliation which shapes the psyche? which then consequently and subsequently informs what becomes the monstrosity. Given Mary's parentage, it is surprising that gendered constructions of the universe are everywhere apparent in Frankenstein. So now we'll begin to see how gendered the language is, how gendered the plot is in many ways. For example, Victor's identification of nature as female, and I quote from the novel, I pursued nature to her hiding places. Unquote. Victor's scientific and technological exploitation of female nature is only one way in which the novel consistently represents the female as passive and able to be possessed, the willing receptacle of male desire. So again, the gaze is very male. The female just becomes the vessel, just an agency that's vessel to carry out and conduct and accommodate the ambitions of the overreaching male. Victor's usurpation of the natural mode of human reproduction implies a kind of destruction of the female. And we have already seen how many female subjects are destroyed, how many female bodies are attacked and assaulted, including that of the female companion that Victor promises to make for his creature, which he destroys in a very, very grotesque and brutal way. So, that itself, that incident that Eve in that image is also a reminder and a pointer of the endless cycle of violence directed at the female subject, the female body, corporeal as well as psychological violence which Frankenstein obviously is a critique of the novel. We see this destruction erupt symbolically in the nightmare following the animation of its creature. While in his embrace, Elizabeth, his bride-to-be, is transformed into the corpse of his dead mother. A shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. So this very close and very problematic proximity between life and death, between destruction and creation, runs throughout the novel.

So, there is this image, there is this reverie that Victor has, where he's embracing his fiancée, Elizabeth, who then, you know, in a very disturbing way, transforms into the corpse of his dead mother, right. So that transition, that projection of deadness is something which we see happening here as well. And also this image of this particular sequence, as we have seen already, it also anticipates the death of Elizabeth, the brutal death of Elizabeth. She is murdered by the creature. So many women get killed, get brutalized, get assaulted in these power games of the men in Mary Shelley's novel. By stealing the female's control over natural reproduction, Victor has eliminated the female's primary biological function and source of cultural power, right. So we see how this is also a way to ensure the agencylessness of the woman over here. So Victor takes away, eliminates a female's primary biological function. We can find very soon the essay will talk about how the gender divide is also prevalent in the functionality of the subject. So, the male occupies the public space, the male is an intellectual, the male is a scientist, the male can be a leader, the male can be an explorer. Whereas the females in novels are mostly relegated to private domestic spaces and this mapping of spaces and gender is important for us to understand because it also tells us a lot about the contemporary conditions of you know gendered subjectivity around the time. Indeed, as a male scientist who creates a male creature, Victor eliminates the biological necessity of femaleness at all. So that is the ultimate fundamental desire in Frankenstein, to eliminate the female, to do away with the female. That rejection of the female is spectacularly evident in the many acts of violence against the woman, against the woman's body, against the female subject. One of the deepest horrors of this novel is the implicit goal of creating a society for men only.

Victor's creature is male. He refuses to create a female. There's no reason why the race of immortal beings he hopes to propagate should not be exclusively male, right? The all-male species that he wants to create is the absolute fantasy that he has, because that will not require any female. And there seems to be a presupposition over here that females cannot be scientists, females cannot be in any positions of power, any positions of public service. So the only job, the only role, the only function of the female over here is to produce more human beings. And if we can get a machine, get an apparatus, get a technology or a

scientific method through which that can be done, that the only necessity of woman, according to Victor's imagination, also disappears. So, we have an old male society created by men, for men, about men. On the cultural and social level, Victor's scientific project to become the sole creator of a superior human being supports a patriarchal denial of the value of woman and of female sexuality. So there is this rejection of female agency. Equally, there is a rejection of female sexuality and that is seen as something completely corporeal in quality, distracting in quality and, you know, best done away with and Victor's very, very hubristic imagination. So Victor's 19th century Genevan society is founded on the rigid division of sex roles. This is the mapping that happens, very polarized mapping of space and gender. Men inhabit the public sphere. women are relegated to the private or domestic sphere.

The men work outside the home as public servants. For example, Alphonse Frankenstein, a scientist, Victor himself as merchants, Henry Clerval and his father, and as explorers, Walton. So Walton being the ultimate explorer, who is similarly set out for a very, very masculinist voyage to conquer the Arctic seas to find out some secret passage. Now, in sharp contrast to this, the women are confined to the home, kept either as a kind of pet, so again, sometimes infantilized, sometimes very, very problematically essentialized. So, Victor loves to, or loved to tend on Elizabeth. So, this is the language in the novel. and as on a favourite animal. So, she is compared to an endearing animal, right. So, as endearing as it may sound, this also denies her any intellect, this also denies her any agency, any kind of rationality which is at par with the men. Or as housewives, child care providers and nurses. For example, Caroline Beaufort, Elizabeth, Margaret Saville or as servants, for example, Justin Moritz, who obviously is very cruelly and tragically framed in a murder case as a result of which she is sentenced to death for a crime she did not commit. So, essentially, Victor is also responsible for her death. Justin Moritz is responsible for the death of Elizabeth and the female creature that he destroys, literally physically destroys in the presence of the male creator. As a consequence of this division, public intellectual activity is segregated from private emotional activity. So, Victor cannot work and love at the same time. He cannot feel empathy for his creature and chooses to work with a large

body species because doing so is easier and faster, despite the fact that his creature will be a deformed giant. So, look at the very utility-based principle of creation over here.

So just to make things happen quickly, I mean, it's almost like in a very crude analogy, it is almost like, you know, picking up things and putting it together to publish something, publish a research, whether it is, you know, written research, whether it is a lab-based research, to publicize it, to get it out there in the world, right, without really taking care to put things together in an organic, seamless way. Because the ambition over here, the greed over here, you know, privatizes itself and it gets the better of other attributes, the greed, the ambition. So these are things which you know become dominant as a result of which the creation becomes or the process of creation becomes very, very lopsided. So the deformity of the giant, the quote unquote grotesqueness of the giant is basically a result or a fallout or an epiphenomenon of Victor's own hasty creation or hasty process of creation. And he remains so self-absorbed that he cannot imagine this creature might threaten someone other than himself on his wedding night. So, on his wedding night, of course, Elizabeth gets killed, but Victor is so obsessed with himself that he thinks that he's going to be attacked, he's going to be assaulted, whereas the monster attacks his fiancée, his wife. But more importantly, look at the mapping of spaces over here and how gendered the mapping happens to be. The separation of the sphere of public as in masculine power from the sphere of private or feminine affection also causes destruction of most of the women in the novel. Caroline Beaufort dies from scarlet fever caught when she alone volunteers to nurse the contagious Elizabeth. Justin, unable to prove her innocence, in the death of William is condemned to death by Victor's refusal to take responsibility for his creature's actions.

So Victor is well aware of how William died and yet he is unable to come up and accept responsibility or take accountability and his failure to do so causes the death, the tragic death of Justin who was sentenced to death. And Elizabeth, of course, she's murdered on her wedding night. The novel offers an alternative to this gendered division of labor in the egalitarian relationships in the De Lacy family, where brother and sister together share the duties of supporting their father. And Safin, an independent woman based in Mary Shelley's feminist mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, is welcomed as Felix's partner. But his ideal family

is ripped out of the novel when the creature enters a household, suggesting that Mary herself did not think such an ideal family could prosper in her time. Now there is one ideal family which is appropriate enough in an idyllic setting, a little bit outside the city, where men and women seem to share responsibilities, seem to share duties, seem to share attributes, are in a more egalitarian, equal setting. But of course, this entire setting is destroyed by the monster, by the creation of Frankenstein. And the suggestion here, as the essay seems to argue, that Mary seems to believe or seems to make home the point that such an egalitarian setting where men and women share together, share responsibilities together, do duties together, will not exist in a sustainable way in the world we live in today. So it will not prosper in time. So, this would obviously be ripped off. This will be attacked by the monster. This will be attacked by the creature that Victor creates. Why does Victor finally refuse to create a mate for his creature, an Eve for his Adam, after having promised to do so? He rationalizes his decision to destroy the half-formed female creature, and this is a quotation from the novel. I was now about to form another being, of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant. She might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for his own sake, in murder and wretchedness.

He had sworn to quit the neighbourhood of man, and hide himself in deserts, but she had not. and she who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal might refuse to comply with the compact made before her creation. They might even hate each other. The creature who already lived loathed his own deformity, and might he not conceive a greater abhorrence for it when he comes before his eyes in a female form? She also might turn with disgust from him to the superior beauty of man. She might quit him, that he be again alone, exasperated by the fresh provocations of being deserted by one of his own species. Even if they were to leave Europe and inhabit the deserts of the New World, yet one of the first results of these sympathies for which the demon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, which might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. had I arrived for my own benefit to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations. So these are the set of arguments which Victor makes in his own mind as to why the female companion should not be created. So what if she is worse than the male? What if she hates them? What if she

doesn't want this companionship and goes on to find company in men? What if they loathe each other? And more importantly, what if everything goes right and they create a generation of quote-unquote monsters, which would be a bigger problem for humanity. So, this is the point in the novel where Victor comes closest to take accountability, take responsibility. So, he terminates the experiment. even before it starts off. So it comes to an abrupt end, it is aborted even before it starts. But then again, of course, we know this complicates the novel even further, because in a certain sense, it also takes away the entire ethical accountability, because ethical accountability to the parent is to give companionship to the child, to make sure the child has a proper upbringing, with proper companionship, with proper holistic love and affection. So in denying his first creature, a female companion, and for which he has a set of rules and narratives to back it up, in a process he also denies companionship, in a process he also denies altruism, love, affection. to something he created, to someone he created.

And that in a way is also, so he is now in a catch 22 situation. So if he gives the female companion to the monster, to the subject, the creator, he is being accountable, being ethical as a parent. But at the same time, there might be more or even broader ethical questions at stake in terms of the whole humanity that might face a more precarious condition. On the other In denying the female companionship to his creature, in a way, he can justify by saying that, well, I am protecting humanity. I am making sure humanity doesn't have to suffer one more monster, one more form of monstrosity. But in doing so, he's denying basic love, affection, and companionship to the first subject that he had created. So, he is caught in this really interesting ambivalence over here. There is no need to write, need to write a wrong over here. And that, again, that moment of stagnation, that moment of fixation, that moment of aporia, you know, something you cannot cross, that also tells us something about the ambivalence embedded in the novel. So we stop at this point today and we'll continue the discussion of this very essay in a subsequent session. Thank you for your attention.