

Course Name: The Novel and Change

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Lecture 21

Frankenstein - Part 10

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled The Novel and Change. We will continue and end this essay by Anne Mellor on nature, the whole idea of parenting and Frankenstein. So in the last class, if you remember, we were talking about how Victor is tied to a bind in a tough spot, in a morally tough spot, where there's no neat answer, no correct resolution, And we are talking about, we are engaging with the moment where he decides to destroy the potential companion for the male monster that he has. And in doing so, his argument is protecting humanity from another point of destruction, another point of monstrosity. But now Anne Mellor goes on to ask some more, some deeper questions, some philosophical questions about this natural innate misogyny of Victor and why does he loathe the woman so much in terms of becoming violent and aggressive towards the woman. So what does Victor truly fear that causes him to rip up his first, his half-finished female creature? So again, if you look at the imagery over here, he rips up the half-finished female creature. It's very disturbing. It's almost, you know, nauseatingly violent. And that is, you know, that deeply disturbing, problematic image, you know, that causes a lot of disgust in a reader's mind. And that's exactly what Mary Shelley is trying to underscore over here. The almost pornographic violence with which Victor... you know rips out you know and destroys and almost through an assault the half-formed female monster again foregrounds the violence directed against the woman throughout the novel. So why does he do it? First, he is afraid that this female will have desires and opinions that cannot be controlled by his male creature.

So, there is that idea of the transgressive woman, something which cannot be controlled by the male creature, by the male partner. Like French, Genevan philosopher, Zorzac Rousseau's natural man, she might refuse to comply with a social contract made by another person before her birth, namely between the creature and Victor himself. So there is moral dynamo here. What if she refuses to abide by the contract between Victor, Frankenstein and the creature, about going away and disappearing somewhere else because the contract was made before her birth, right. So that is always a legally valid argument. A second fear is that her uninhibited female desires might be sadistic in quality. So again, there is this innate fear of female violence, right, sadism or cruelty. And that seems to tell us something about Victor Frankenstein's psychological makeup. Victor imagines a female creature 10,000 times more evil than her mate, who would delight in murder for his own sake. Third, so there is this fear of pure cruelty that comes from the woman. So, that is attributed to the woman in a very interesting way. And that also is part of the misogyny in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, which is critiqued, of course. Third, he fears that his female creature will be uglier than his male creature. so much so that even the male would return from her in disgust. So, the idea of grotesqueness might be more. Fourth, he fears that she would prefer to mate with ordinary human males. Implicit here is Frankenstein's horror that given his female creature's gigantic strength, she would have the ability to seize and even rape a man she might choose. So the fear of the man getting sexually assaulted by a woman. That too is something which is a deterrent to Victor for creating, that may have contributed to the abortion of the project and how he aborts it even before it takes off, the project of creating a female companion. finally, so these are reasons why which may have played in Victor's mind and we can interpret it this way in terms of why he decides to abort the project of creating the female companion.

And finally, he is afraid of her reproductive powers. her capacity to generate an entire race of similar creatures. So what if she creates a set of creatures or procreates with the male companion an entire generation of monsters, an entire generation, an entire race, which is grotesque by quote-unquote normal human standards. So what Victor truly fears is female sexuality as such, the ownership that a female can have on her own sexuality, the agency, that a woman can have on her own body, on her own gender. A woman who is sexually

liberated, free to choose her own life and her own sexual partner by force, if necessary, unable to propagate at will, can only appear monstrously ugly, even evil to him because she defies the sexist aesthetic that insists a woman should be small, delicate, modest, passive and sexually pleasing, but available only to the lawful husband. So, the entire patriarchal order, entire patriarchal structure, which, you know, shapes institutions of marriage, religion, you know, family, family structure, etc., would be potentially, can be potentially subverted, can be potentially decimated by this physically strong woman, by this intellectually strong woman, which can, you know, that creature, if created by Victor, might actually subvert or transgress all these patriarchal codes and that becomes a big problem. So the fear of sexuality is not just a woman taking control of her own body but also a physically stronger woman who can assault the male and you know do reverse sexual violence. So that stops Victor from proceeding with this. Horrified by this image of uninhibited female sexual desire and power, Victor violently reasserts the male control over the female body penetrating and mutilating the female creature in an image that suggests a violent rape. Trembling with passion, I tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged. So obviously the imagery over here is very phallic in quality. The imagery is very violent in quality and that violence again is a form of externalization of the grotesque mind of Victor, right. The idea of the female being submissive, obedient, small, delicate.

So, that idea is getting potentially attacked. And that attack, that fear of being attacked, the level of ideas, is prompting victims, triggering this violence, the very sexual violence a victim engages with. And it tears apart the female subject even before she is born. So again, it's a classic case of abortion, almost biological abortion, the half-formed child. And we talked about how the beginning of Mary Shelley's miscarriages, Mary Shelley's tragedies with children may have shaped this imagery in some form or the other. The next morning, when he returns to the scene, the remains of the half-finished creature whom I had destroyed lay scattered on the floor, and I almost felt that I had mangled the living flesh of a human being. So again, a very, very disturbing, unsettling imagery of violence, visceral violence. And the viscosity is important over here as well. However, in Mary's feminist novel, Victor's efforts to control and even to eliminate female sexuality altogether is portrayed not only as horrifying and finally unattainable, but also as self-destructive. For

nature is not the passive, inert or dead matter that he imagines. Victor assumes that he can violate nature and pursue her to her hiding places with impunity. So again, the whole idea of hunting down nature in the places where he hides is almost like a shooting encounter metaphor, right? So I'm going to hunt you down and find you, discover you. So this is a process of forceful, violent navigation. So nature cannot hide anywhere. And, you know, I'll pull out nature from... hiding places with violence. Something similar happens at a level of exploration as well. So Walton, for example, at the beginning of the novel, has a similar ambition of going into the Arctic seas and finding all the hidden places of the Arctic seas and in the process discovering this new navigational route, right. So again, this very process of mapping nature, creating a cartographic construct around nature is a way to confine the wildness of nature.

So just like Victor is very, very disturbed by the potential wildness, biological bodily wildness of the female creature, the explorer in the novel, the sailor in the novel also wants to take control of the sea just so any potential wildness can be thwarted, can be done away with. But Mother Nature both resists and revenges himself upon his attempts. During his research, Nature denies to Victor Frankenstein both mental and physical health. Every night I was oppressed by a slow fever and I became nervous to the most painful degree. When he decides to create a second creature and again defy natural reproduction, his mental illness returns. So almost feverish and the fever image is important over here. Every word that I spoke in allusion to it caused my lips to quiver and my heart to palpitate. My spirits became unequal. I grew restless and nervous. Finally, Victor's obsession with destroying his male creature exposes him to such mental and physical fatigue that he dies of natural causes at the age of 25. So this is something which we sometimes miss in a novel that Victor Franklinton dies when he's 25 years old. He almost like what he creates consumes him back. And essentially and symbolically he is consumed by his own ambition, he is consumed by his own overreaching hubris, right, which comes in quite literally at a very cellular level consumes him back. Right. Appropriately, nature prevents Victor from constructing a normal human being. His unnatural method of reproduction spawns an unnatural being, a freak of gigantic stature. So again, something you know, of an aberration, something which is a freak. Watery eyes, shriveled complexion, and straight black lips. His creature's physiognomy then causes Victor's revulsion from his child. So

again, this idea of anti-affection. So instead of being drawn to the child with affection, he's, you know, repelled by the child in a state of anti-affection, and that itself instead of the birth of the subject, this is the birth of the abject, and that moment of abandoning the child, abandoning the child from love, neglecting the child, this moment of abuse, the start of the abuse, that itself is a moment where the abject is born, rather than a subject is born.

Okay, so... It sets in motion the series of events that finally produces the monster and destroys his family, friends and self. So, we talked about how there are different orders of accountability. One for the monster, one you know what he creates, one is to the monster, to this creature and the third is on his self and Victor fails in all three accounts. He fails to create something which is responsible, something which is ethical. So, in a way he destroys a large part of the ethical well-being in the world he lives in. Secondly, he fails to provide for what he creates. He fails to be a good father, he fails to be a good parent. So his accountability to what he creates is also hijacked, is also a frustrated failed accountability. And finally his accountability to his own self which he again destroys because you know he destroys his own life, his own mental and physical health. Moreover, nature pursues Victor with the very electricity, the spark of being that he has stolen. So again, the Prometheus metaphor comes back. So he steals fire from nature. He steals energy from nature. In this case, it's electricity. And he is cursed forever. He's damned forever because of that in a very Promethean kind of way. So, lightning, thunder and rain rage around him. So, there is this constant images of lightning and thunder and rain in the novel, right, which is like nature hitting back at Victor for stealing electricity, for stealing the energy of life. Rain pours down on the dreary night of November on which he contemplates his experiment. When he returns to Geneva, he glimpses his creature on the Alps through a violent storm and flush of lightning.

After destroying the female creature, he sets sail to dispose of the remains in the ocean and is caught up by a fierce wind and high waves that portend his own death. I looked upon the sea. It was to be my grave. Witter ends his life in the Arctic regions, surrounded by the ice, the aurora borealis, and the electromagnetic field of the North Pole. The novel's atmospheric effects, which is why you find Frankenstein is so supremely cinematic in

quality. So, it has got all the elements, the visual panoramic elements of cinema, which is why it has historically lent itself to cinematic medium so seamlessly, so organically, right? So, it is very atmospheric, the landscape is very atmospheric, it is electrically charged, we have this massive panoramic shots of storms and seas and electromagnetic currents and the aurora in the arctics. So, all that spectacular you know audio visual elements which you know lend themselves so seamlessly. into the cinematic form of representation are present in Frankenstein. So even the Aurora Borealis, which is supposed to be this most spectacular show of light and electromagnetic show on earth, the natural show, that too is part of the novel. The novel's atmospheric effects, which most readers have dismissed as the traditional trappings of Gothic fiction, in fact, manifest the power of nature to punish those who transgress their boundaries, nature hitting back. So, the atmospheric effects in the novel are far from just aesthetic in quality, they also punitive in quality. It's a punishment towards or for transgression. It's a punishment for someone who wanted to overreach. So there is a Faustian quality about Frankenstein. You know this famous Faustian myth about someone who sells his soul to the devil to get ultimate knowledge, get transgressive knowledge, you know, which has invested or which has informed so many representations.

Dr. Fosges by Christopher Marlowe, for example. Something Fosgian happens here as well. So, Victor essentially, symbolically, he transgresses, you know, he acquires, aspires for order of knowledge which is beyond the permitted perimeter, so to speak. And so nature heads back with Vengeance, right, for transgressing her boundaries. The elemental forces that Victor has released pursue him into his hiding places, raging around him like the female spirits of Vengeance. Fury in Greek drama. So again, fury is something which you find, you know, in Greek drama rampantly. So there's hubris, there's hamartia, there's fury. There are these long stretches of oceanic currents, stretches of adventure across the oceans, all these elements of Greek tragedy, Greek drama you know are recycled in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein but it's not just because of aesthetic, atmospheric effects. They also have very serious and profound functions of plot in terms of what is happening in the novel. So, Mary Shelley's novel not only portrays the penalties of violating nature, but also celebrates the all-creating nature that is loved and revered by human beings. Those characters capable of feeling the beauties of nature are rewarded with physical and mental health. Henry Clerval's

relationship to nature, for example, represents one moral touchstone in the novel, because in love with other the scenery of external nature is endowed with a generous sympathy, a vivid imagination, a sensitive intelligence, and an unbounded capacity for devoted friendship. So whoever loves nature, whoever is, you know, seamlessly and organically connected to nature gets good health, you know, mental health as well as physical health. And of course, Victor Frankenstein destroys all this because of his transgressive nature of his experiment, of his super scientific project.

And it is no accident that the only member of the Frankenstein family is still alive at the end of the novel is Ernest, who rejects the career of lawyer to become instead of farmer one who must live in harmony and cooperation with the forces of nature, one who lives a very healthy, happy life and in most beneficial profession of any. So farmer obviously brings someone who brings up nature, someone who produces more nature. So nature loves him back in very symbolic, appropriate ways. So he's the only surviving member of the Frankenstein family, Ernest, who rejects being a lawyer and becomes a farmer. So essentially the opposite direction of Victor Frankenstein. Victor moves away from nature and has this very hubristic aspiration to create super nature, right? Whereas Ernest goes the other way around. He moves away from the cultural artifact of love into the pastoral, ideal quality of farming, which is why he is rewarded in the end. As Frankenstein finally shows, An unmothered child, like a scientific experiment that is performed without consideration of its probable or even its unintended results that radically changes the natural order, can become a monster. So the radicality of the monster in Frankenstein is part of the abandonment part of the fact that you know this is an abundant child an abused child so this this child abuse quality the child neglect quality the unloved child in Frankenstein is what makes it the monster the creature a monster and Frankenstein becomes a cautionary tale of parental neglect, a cautionary tale of abuse, of not affection, the absence of affection.

And that absence of affection is exactly what causes the monstrosity in the novel. And in the process, the monstrosity which is created can come back and consume its maker, consume its creator, which is what happens in Mary Shelley's novel. The novel implicitly endorses instead a science that seeks to understand rather than to change the workings of mother nature, something which is more organically connected, more complicit with nature

rather than being subversive to nature, something which is more organically connected, tied, and corresponds closely with nature rather than trying to transgress nature right so it seems to call for a kind of science which is more nature oriented rather than more nature disoriented so it doesn't want a science which disorients nature as a cautionary tale against disorientation right Again, Mother Nature over here is the feminine. Mother Nature over here is the subject, is the entity which brings the child up, which creates proper parenting, healthy parenting, which is what the novel advocates for. And obviously, it's critiquing the other kind of parenting, the parenting of abandonment, the parenting of neglect, the parenting of abuse. The parenting is driven by this unleashed and uncontrolled ambition, a hubristic ambition of conquering the world, right? So Mary's novel, in conclusion, Mary's novel thus resonates powerfully. And we find this again and again. Why is the novel read today with so much force, with so much currency, with so much cultural currency? Why does it keep connecting so well and perhaps more uniquely and more robustly to a society which is post-genetic engineering, a society which is post-internet, post-algorithms, post-artificial intelligence? And the reason is this. So Mary Shelley's novel, Mary's novel, thus resonates powerfully with the ethical problems inherent in the most recent advances in genetics. The introduction of germline engineering through CRISPR, CAS9.

So, these are the genome engineering, the genetic sequencing engineering which are prevalent since 90s really. Techniques of DNA alteration. the current scientific possibility of producing what Victor Frankenstein dreamed of. So through genetic mutation, through genetic engineering and re-engineering we can essentially quote unquote mess with nature, right. And with this messing of nature, we can subvert the natural sequences, the organic original sequences and try to create a different order altogether, right. So, this is again very resonant, this can dial right back to Victor Frankenstein's original fundamental fantasy of doing away with mother nature, doing away with women and creating this masculinist code of procreation. I use the word code quite consciously because genes are codes and genetic engineering is all about codes and how can you re-code and rewire the codes. So what did Victor Frankenstein dream of? Of a superhuman designer baby, right. This is a vocabulary which has come up in a post-genetic engineering culture. Design a baby. Or you can design a baby. Rather than give birth to a baby, how can you design a baby through an artificial

process? And the artificiality of the entire process is critiqued and warned against in Mary Shelley's novel. Lastly, at the same time, the novel vividly illustrates the terrifying ramifications and unintended consequences of such attempts to improve the human species, right. So the whole idea of improving the human species, this ambition, this aspiration, this hubris, that one man can improve the human species is something which is critiqued, you know, in a very scathing way, in a very subtle yet scathing way. And the novel illustrates the terrifying dangers, the disastrous consequences of any ambition which wants to do this. So, it is a cautionary tale which uses a lot of tropes of Gothic fiction, the entire panoramic landscape and all the rest of it.

But at the same time, it's a tale which is deeply and richly resounded with our times in a post-nuclear fission culture, in a post-algorithm culture, in a post-genetic engineering culture. So with that, we end this particular essay. And we will have one more session where we talk about Frankenstein and how it connects to the subsequent novels that we will take up. But just in summary, just as a conclusion, we will see how this novel, falling from Robinson Crusoe, now that we ended looking at the secondary scholarship of Frankenstein as well, we find how this novel is deeply connected to some of the later works of literature that we will take up subsequently. And the discussions we'll have on Frankenstein will be in keeping with some of the texts we will take up in subsequent sessions. But just to remind ourselves one more time, I reiterate, this is a novel which is written by an 18-year-old woman. I mean, it is a prodigious work. It is a prodigious work of literature. It is a work of genius, really. It is one of the most enduring novels with one of the most enduring legacies of all time. And like you said at the beginning of the session, it has become some kind of an archetype. You say the word Frankenstein, it literally and immediately pumps in a metaphoric imagination, a metaphoric significance. You know, it is about a monstrous imagination.

It is about an experiment going wrong. It is about creating someone, something or someone which comes back and destroys the creator. So, all this cultural semantic significance, symbolic semantic, metaphoric significance, you know, is entirely woven around this metaphor, which is why this novel so richly has this archetypal quality. And I think it is as a tribute, as a corroboration to Mary Shelley's genius as a writer that it still enjoys a

legacy, very well deserved legacy through which we read it today in 2024. So with that we end Frankenstein. We will have a session subsequently where we might use Frankenstein to move on to the other text subsequently. But what we have done throughout the last few sessions in the novel is look at the text and the context together. And hopefully you have a rounded full idea of how this text can be situated within the context, the scientific political context, the French Revolution, the different scientific experiments and discourses around the time that Mary Shelley was obviously aware of, and how even the biographical details of Mary Shelley, the tragedies that she suffered as a parent, as a wife, the tragedies of neglect and abuse and abandonment, how even those contribute to the, or may have contributed to the plot of the novel in very, very complex ways. So with that, we end this text and the reading of the text in terms of its social situatedness, in terms of how it manages to capture and calibrate the changes around its contemporary conditions, material cultural conditions, and we'll move on to a new text in a subsequent session. Thank you for your attention.