

Discuss the character of Victor Frankenstein as a modern Prometheus.

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus is the complete title of Mary Shelley's novel. It takes us back to the mythological figure of Prometheus, who is said to have made clay figures of men and women: and then have animated them by stealing fire from the gods. Thus, mankind came into being in the world.

The question naturally arises why does Mary Shelley use this mythical figure? It at once prompts us to see the analogy between the mythological figure and Victor: the ambitious scientist who encroaches upon a forbidden territory and is consequently severely punished. The forbidden territory is that of giving birth: which is associated with the female sex on the grounds of biology and reality and with Divine grace and spirituality too. Victor is an ambitious scientist, an over-reacher: who drifts into this unknown and forbidden territory in order to satisfy his unquenchable thirst for knowledge. But instead of understanding the principles of nature, combined with his lack of knowledge: he displaces God. Playing God, he animates assembled dead matter and creates a new species. The result horrifies and shocks him: and he completely abandons his own creation, taking absolutely no responsibility for it, whatever. His sin is double: first, he infringes upon forbidden territory; and then second, more heinously, he commits the crime of disowning his creation and refusing to take the responsibility that a parent owes towards its child. The monster is abandoned to fend for itself, and at first it seeks human acceptance, companionship. The process of its self-education actually begins when he reaches a hovel behind the shelter of the De Lacey family. Here not only does it learn affection, harmony and love: but also learns language and the inequities of the history of humanity. After getting hold of books like Plutarch's Lives and Paradise Lost, it seeks love and friendship; but the treatment it gets, turns it into a really evil monster. Its rage turns into a terrible fury like overflowing lava. Had it been properly nurtured, brought up by its creator: things might have turned out differently. Thus, the modern Prometheus is an irresponsible scientist; who, instead of benefiting humanity, unleashes horror and destruction upon it.

In the sub-title of her work, Mary Shelley refers to the mythological figure of Prometheus. There are two versions of the myth of Prometheus; one Greek, the other Roman. In Greek mythology, Prometheus (the name probably means 'forethought') is a Titan god of fire. One version is that he stole fire from the gods for the benefit of mankind: as described in the Prometheus Bound by Aeschylus. The other, Ovidian version, says that Prometheus was the creator who 'took up' a clod of clay, mixed it up with water and moulded it in the shape of gods, 'who govern all.' In the Aeschylus version, Prometheus is punished by Zeus, chained to a rock, and continuously tortured for his daring crime. In the Western classical tradition, Prometheus became the representative of human striving, particularly the quest for scientific knowledge and also taking the risk of over-reaching and incurring unintended consequences. (This version is clearly reflected in Mary Shelley's novel). In particular, he was regarded in the Romantic era as the lone genius whose efforts to benefit mankind, to improve human existence could also result in tragedy. This is the cause of Mary Shelley giving 'The Modern Prometheus' as the sub-title of her 1818 novel, Frankenstein.

In the novel, the eponymous protagonist, the ambitious scientist, Victor Frankenstein, dares, over-reaches too much, displaces the role exclusively played by God and women in the sacred and complicated, mysterious process of creating life. Though his motive is laudable: as he acts with the positive intention to banish disease from the human frame, he blunders due to his lack of adequate knowledge, and is severely punished for his sin of transgression into God's own, sacred territory, namely creating life by animating dead matter. The knowledge required for the act of creating life that he lacks is a sacred knowledge: known only by God. Mankind's access to knowledge is, after all, limited: and after a certain stage a human being cannot proceed further. Victor's second crime in his daring project is even more heinous than the first; he completely disowns responsibility for his act, abandoning the creature he irresponsibly gave life to for satisfying his own whim, ambition, leaving it to fend for itself in an environment hostile to it. Doing anything for satisfying one's own whim and then completely avoiding responsibility for it is a sin indeed: specially when the deed is the sacred one of creating life. Victor gloats over his project: which rules out the role of both God and woman, an area which is kept consecrated for these two entities only. Victor says; 'A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me.' There are two points to be noted here. One is that these are the words of a supreme over-reacher: who dares challenge God. Here lies the second point: Victor clearly resembles the mythological Prometheus who also dared God for the purpose of benefiting humanity: and for which both the mythological Prometheus and his modern, fictional counterpart are subjected to extreme punishment.

The quoted words of Victor Frankenstein smack of an extreme over-reacher. He is an over-intoxicated (by ambition) scientist who chooses to displace God: his hubris is the sin of Satan. Too soon, Victor realises his blundering mission; finding his hideous creation, too much ugly for his sight. Initially the creature is not evil: he craves human acceptance, love. Denied these, he repeatedly appeals to his creator for a companion: again denied which he turns into a really evil being, goes on a murder spree, killing Victor's youngest brother, William Frankenstein, and implicating William's nanny, the innocent Justine Moritz in his murder, Victor's childhood friend Henry Clerval, and finally Victor's bride, Elizabeth Lavenza, on his wedding-night, creating havoc in society on a large scale. All these due to irresponsible parenting.