

## Natural Sin: Observing Nature's Wrath in *Frankenstein*

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines the tragic hero as a man of high social status who invites the gods to punish him through overbearing pride and/or presumption – hubris. It would be simple to assign the label of hubristic tragic hero to Victor Frankenstein, but such assignment of a label would be an oversimplification. The gods in Greek drama punish, albeit harshly, in an outright manner. The tragic figure is aware that the gods have forsaken him, and he resigns to live his life under the demands of retribution. Victor Frankenstein's fate is not so simple; fate is crueler to Victor and more spiteful than he could ever be to the heavens. The question that precedes all others, however, is who is or what acts as god in *Frankenstein*.

It is safe to assume that Victor Frankenstein's god is that of the Christian tradition, although interestingly, he never truly mentions it as such. Instead, he invokes the spirits of nature and swears by the "sacred earth on which [he] kneel[s]" that he will get his revenge (Shelley 173); so it is only fitting that it is nature or the laws of nature that feel offended by Victor's transgression and his vulgar presumption that he can emulate its force. What drives Victor to do so is a complicated issue, but what is rather clear is that the setting of the novel is ideal for such a crime.

The distinction between nature's powers and godly powers is a relatively new concept. For many ancient cultures, nature was inexorably tied to the ultimate spirit; and although men could speak to the spirits, they were in no way like the spirits. Before altering any object in nature, one needed permission from these spirits. This changed with the growth of Christianity: "Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (White 10). Christianity made humanity's views on nature and God anthropocentric; man was "the sole subject, speaker, and rational sovereign of the natural order" (Manes 21). By removing the godly powers from nature, it becomes open to exploit and experimentation.

Western scientists, beginning around the thirteenth century, took this one step further. They began making discoveries and formulating experiments under the pretext of discovering how God's creatures operate. The danger suspected by naturalists proved true – men of science began to feel that nature belonged to them and that if God had allowed them to get so close to nature and its functions, that they were obviously allowed to play with it as they pleased:

As technologies enabling dramatic transformations of the natural order increasingly appeared in the modern period, and as a new and much more powerful knowledge of what was believed to be the true order of nature began to emerge in the science of Galileo, Newton and their successors, is it so surprising that Westerners came to think of themselves as "lords of creation" with a possibility, and a mandate, to expand human powers over nature ...? (Kaufman 9)

It is therefore not surprising that a man of Victor Frankenstein's time, education, and passions would succumb to such a mentality. Victor himself explains his fascination with these scientists:

They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and show how she works in her hiding places. They ascend into the heavens ... they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows (Shelley 53).

Like the alchemists he studies, Victor seeks to fulfill the four attributes that Waldman, his professor, assigns to the ancient scientists. Although having abandoned the theories of these men, Victor returns to these scientists who "penetrate into the recesses of nature ... ascend into the heavens ... acquired new and unlimited powers ... and mock the invisible world with its own shadows" (Shelley 53). His work reveals that he fulfills, like his predecessors and newly found

advisors, the four duties. The creation of another being is a testament to the knowledge and power nature and its laws seek to hide from humanity but that Victor, in a bold and impassioned manner, uncovers anyway. Like the alchemists, he seeks to take base matter, or dead body parts, and turn it into precious metal, the final product.

But one wonders why Victor is so chided and tortured for doing so. The explanation lies in the nature of the creation. Whereas modern scientists poked and prodded the laws of nature, Victor creates another being from miscellaneous body parts and then animates it with other natural material such as lightning. Unlike the creation of life in nature, which is serendipitous and cyclical, Victor forces life to manifest under his terms and his conditions; and far from being the precious metal the alchemists aimed for, it turns out to be a disgrace. This being he creates is deemed useless and superfluous, an excremental product and a “filthy creation” (Shelley 58). Victor’s education and passion also mirror Harold Fromm’s explanation of man’s intrusion on nature:

In the early days, man had no power over Nature and turned, instead, to his mind and its gods for consolation. Meanwhile, his mind produces a technology that enables his body to be as strong as the gods, rendering the gods superfluous and putting nature in a cage (35).

In a sense, Victor takes the power he has acquired through knowledge and attempted to reproduce it to the point where it treads on the laws of nature. Not only is Victor’s creation unnecessary, the implications for society are obvious and dangerous: “Artificial creations call upon [humanity] to come forth with an alien, artificial quasi wisdom or quasi intelligence to deal with them” (Heatherly 75). Victor has disobeyed nature’s powers, but even worse, he has put a strain on his society by forcing it to deal with the “unnatural” creation. Thus, even when the monster acts as a savior, as is the case when it saves a girl from drowning, it is treated as an abomination, therefore nullifying his act and discouraging the monster from repeating its altruism. In the end, the monster becomes a bitter outcast that unleashes its anger on humanity.

“Supreme morality makes it its principle of living to renounce one’s self and obey the law of nature or God” (Matsuura 370). Victor does neither and is therefore castigated by nature. His “reflections” are all inward. He looks inside himself when he “reflects,” and he never thinks to look beyond himself, even after his transgression. One of the most striking examples of Victor’s verbally and dramatically ironic uses of the word “reflection” occurs towards the end of the novel: “My rage is unspeakable, when I reflect that the murderer, whom I have turned loose upon society, still exists” (Shelley 171). Here, Victor uses the word to mean a simple introspection. To be fair, he does admit that he creates and unleashes the murderer, but even as he “reflects,” he doesn’t call himself the murderer. He only calls himself the murderer when the creature kills a family member, but when he is faced with his societal irresponsibility, he separates himself from his creation and calls *it* the murderer. Victor refuses to take the ultimate responsibility the laws of nature would perhaps like him to take.

In contrast, when the monster itself “reflects,” it looks to scenes of nature. It first sees its hideousness in a pool of water (Shelley 104) and learns the dangers of fire when it places its hand on flaming embers (Shelley 97). Like an abandoned infant, the monster is forced to learn by itself; and instead of the jubilant feeling the infant gets when it first realizes it is itself in the mirror, the monster is mortified with no one to console it. The monster is forced to seek some “mother” figure. Nature, as a witness to Victor’s hubris and abandonment and as the entity the monster turns to, adopts the wretched creature and protects it from its father’s (Victor’s) custody. But nature is not solely benevolent. Like a scorned divorced parent, it uses the monster to hurt Victor. Victor then is “condemned by nature’s gods to limitless suffering ... his own creature is his nemesis, teaching him his properly limited, human place” (Sherwin 27).

If David Collings is correct, Victor “identifies with his mother, recovering her body in his own as he attempts to become pregnant himself, to labor in childbirth, and to watch the child awaken, gesture and attempt to speak” (282). The problem is that apart from creating a being from parts obtained from the grave, and subsequently from the realm of death, Victor attempts to play the role of mother and abandons his duties. He creates an unacceptable creature; he never embraces it; and he leaves it to fend for itself in the world. Here, he has broken three laws of nature in terms of the maternal. It is only fitting that the monster is embraced by “Mother Nature,” but in a cruel twist, only to torture Victor. This is evident in the fact that as soon as Victor dies, the monster destroys itself. The monster is of no use on the Earth any longer. In fact, it never was.

Less significant instances, at least as they relate to Victor’s life, such as the rain from a “black and comfortless sky” (Shelley 60) that pours upon his discovery of the monster or the fact that in a personified manner, “the moon gaze[s] on [his] midnight labors” (Shelley 58) speak to nature’s observance and disapproval of Victor’s wish to learn the secrets of heaven and of earth. However, nature’s disregard for Victor comes to fruition in much more vengeful ways, and even the fact that the monster destroys his most beloved family members is only the surface of the issue. First of all, the monster is imbued with physical abilities far superior than those of humans. Ironically enough, it is Victor who, perhaps out of hubris and the need to outdo nature’s creational abilities, makes the monster much larger in physical stature than a human being. In a malicious manner, nature uses this example of inflated ambition against Victor. The creator hopes until the end to be able to capture the monster, but it is clear that this is a pointless aim. Far from empowering it to swim with lightning speed and to leap through mountains, nature has empowered the creature with knowledge through volumes of work like *Paradise Lost* that mysteriously “fall” from some undisclosed place into the creature’s hands and that reveal to him the concept of creation, a creation he then questions Victor about. According to David Hume, “as nature has taught us use of our limbs, without giving us the knowledge of the muscles and nerves ... so she has implanted in us an instinct, which carries forward the thought in a corresponding course to that which she has established among external objects” (Reich 50). Thus, the monster is now capable of understanding its nature and its origins, and it uses it against its own creator. So, Victor is not only tortured with the loss of life in his close circle, he is mentally tortured by the fact that he can never destroy what he himself creates. Even more ironically, it is not he who gives his monster these strengths and abilities that will allow it to pursue its creator; it is nature that does so as a punishment to Victor.

One of the most striking examples of nature’s trickery occurs upon Victor’s return to Geneva after having made and abandoned the monster. He is supposed to arrive in Geneva in autumn, or the “fall,” which if taken as a pun would reflect Victor’s state as a tragic figure, but because of inclement weather during the winter, he is set to arrive in the spring, a time of natural birth and splendor. Furthermore, he arrives back at the college, after having been away from his monstrous memories, to a “serene sky” and “verdant fields” (Shelley 71). He states that he became the same “happy creature who ... had no sorrow or care” (Shelley 71). He is taken back to his guiltless youth only to be punished with the letter from his father telling him about his brother’s murder, a murder that the reader immediately attributes to the monster but that Justine, another member of Victor’s circle, is martyred for.

At times, when Victor seeks to escape the burden of his responsibility for these two deaths, he turns to nature to feel comfort. In an ironic fashion, Victor turns to the forsaken god or mother for comfort:

Often, after the rest of the family had retired for the night, I took the boat, and passed many hours upon the water. Sometimes, with my sails set, I was carried by the wind; and sometimes, after rowing in the middle of the lake, I left the boat to pursue its own course, and gave way to my own miserable reflections. I was often tempted. When all was at

peace around me, and I the only unquiet thing that wandered restless in a scene so beautiful and heavenly ... I was tempted to plunge into the silent lake, that the waters might close over me and my calamities for ever (Shelley 87).

Victor allows nature to control him and take him, a stark contrast from what he does when he creates the monster. Furthermore, he praises nature and its powers and seeks to console himself in her depths. However, that consolation doesn't come at this particular moment in the novel.

When consolation does come, however, it is normally and entirely to lull Victor into a false sense of security. Similar to the example of his arrival at his college, but much more sadistic in its implications, is the scenery surrounding Victor's travels to Lavenza with Elizabeth. Elizabeth, herself an embodiment of nature's most beautiful side with her "celestial eyes" and the "sunshine of her smiles," becomes the last and most painful victim, excepting Victor himself. His wedding day appears perfect, and both he and his betrothed delight in the "snowy mountains" and the "innumerable fish that are swimming in the clear waters" (Shelley 165-166); yet as the sun sets on the "divine day," as Victor himself calls it, his fears come back to him, and the reader cannot help but think that this image of serenity and natural peace is only a mockery and a trap. Indeed, it turns out thus. Nature has plotted against and fooled Victor, and Elizabeth is murdered by Victor's monster under the "pale yellow light of the moon" (Shelley 168). Victor observes his creation pointing the finger at the corpse of Elizabeth and like lightning, the monster jumps into the lake. Mother Nature, acting like a disgruntled mother, uses her adopted "son" to destroy the future bearer of Victor's more beautiful and more socially acceptable human sons. This is the ultimate revenge, at least temporarily, for nature. Upon completing his adopted mother's mission, the monster returns to her bosom, the lake.

This idea of Elizabeth as the epitome of what is naturally beautiful is also furthered by Victor's own nightmare upon first seeing the monster. When he plants a kiss on Elizabeth in his dream, she is immediately turned from the "bloom of health" to "the corpse of [his] dead mother" (Shelley 61). One interpretation of this dream is that Victor realizes that he has corrupted nature in its purest form. Furthermore, he has brought back to his mind the image of his dead mother in a decomposed form. The image of the rotting corpse of the mother could again be Victor's realization that he has offended the source of life or it could be a message to Victor that in fact Mother Nature is dead to him. As a result, Victor should not expect to find comfort in nature any longer, yet he continues to do so, which further insults the superior powers.

But the ultimate trick nature plays on Victor is not the aforementioned example of his father's letter, nor is it the haunting reminders of his sin in his dreams. It isn't even Elizabeth's death. Victor is always teased into thinking that he is close to capturing the monster, as is the case at the end of the novel when he comes within a mile of the monster. At that moment, "the wind arose; the sea roared; and, as with the mighty shock of the earthquake, [the ice] split, and cracked with tremendous and overwhelming sound" (Shelley 177). After using the monster to sustain him in his quest by putting food in his path and by leaving footprints to guide him, nature itself stops Victor from catching up. Victor is kept alive and helped along by the monster, nature's tool, only to be teased and taunted by the failure that inevitably ensues. Once again, Mother Nature makes sure Victor doesn't get custody of the monster, and she only offers her help to complete her mission and to reprimand Victor. Nature only aids him to ultimately betray him.

This leads to an interesting observation. To return to William's murder for a moment would reveal how nature turns its back on Victor once again. Seeking peace and an escape from the family turmoil, Victor attempts to climb to the summit of Montanvert. If one equates the summit of a mountain to the highest attainable point closest to "heaven," one has to infer that Victor is perhaps seeking contact with the superior spirit he has offended and trespassed upon. On his way up, Victor exclaims, "Wandering spirits, if indeed ye wander, and do not rest in your narrow beds, allow me this faint happiness, or take me, as your companion, away from the joys of life" (Shelley 92). Even in his incantation, Victor reveals no true surrender to nature. He

questions the existence of its powers and then asks it to take it as its *companion*, which implies parity with it. Nature's response is of no surprise. Immediately, the monster appears to impart its tale of suffering to its creator, and it is then that nature clears the path to the summit. It would appear that it only allows Victor to come close in order to burden him with his crime and its consequences.

All of this would appear to explain why the natural occurrences that happen to Victor happen and how they punish him. The question is whether or not he was ever given a chance to redeem himself, which leads to a discussion of the female monster. The male monster (if indeed it can be called a male) seeks companionship and vows to leave Victor and humanity in peace upon the fulfillment of this request. If one accepts that nature is using the monster as the vehicle for vengeance and that it speaks through the monster, then one also has to accept that the request for the female is a request that nature, the godly mother, makes on behalf of its wretched son. There are no guarantees that Victor's completion of the female would have appeased the monster or the forces that drive the monster, but one wonders why Victor doesn't at least make the female without the ability to reproduce. (This is assuming the original monster could itself reproduce.) It would appear a viable solution; yet, Victor refuses to comply, thus angering the monster and the gods (nature) even further. Simply put, Victor creates a being when not asked, but he refuses it upon request of two beings that have proven superior to him, the monster and nature. To further the irony, Victor explains his refusal by calling the potential completion of the female and act of "atrocious selfishness" (Shelley 148). Again, one wonders whether the selfishness is really in the completion of the work he abandons (as he does the male) or in the refusal itself. From the perspective of the punisher, Victor has dared to worsen the situation.

The other interesting facet of the situation with the female monster rests in the method Victor uses to discard the female. He puts the remains in the basket and appropriately enough, dumps them into the sea. Furthermore, he waits until the moon is "overspread by a thick cloud" and until there is a "moment of darkness" (Shelley 149) to actually drop the bag into the water. The possibility here is that subconsciously, Victor is truly aware of his second transgression against nature. By returning the parts to the ocean, a vastly unexplored object of nature, and by waiting until not even the moon can witness the act (as it had his work on the first monster), Victor may be indirectly admitting his fear of being further chastised. What this illustrates, however, is a form of blind ignorance and again, hubris. It is not possible to hide such an act from nature. This is similar to the irony in Victor's keeping his crime from men. He thinks he is doing man a favor by not disclosing it, but the secret reveals itself time and again and victimizes innocent people. Victor's attempts at hiding from his punisher are futile, and his insistence on doing so is insulting.

Even the way Victor interprets the word "nature" is sometimes worthy of attention. When performing his first discoveries at the university, Victor explains, "the information [he] had obtained was of a *nature* rather to direct my endeavors so soon as I should point them towards the object of my search, than to exhibit that object already accomplished" (Shelley 57). The problems arises in the object nature has in mind and the object Victor has in mind. Hume argues that "a passion may be called unreasonable when it is directed at the wrong object, or it has the wrong means to satisfy it" (Mounce 70). The *nature* of the knowledge Victor acquires is indeed the driving force towards the object, the monster; but there is only an issue when Victor himself invents that nature in his own mind and further invents an object that is created by the wrong means. Another example, and a comically ironic one, occurs shortly thereafter when Victor asks, "how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his *nature* will allow" (Shelley 57). Taken as a pun, nature here can mean the tendencies of the human being, but once the reader knows Victor's crime, he/she interprets nature to mean the uncontrollable forces that produce and control the world. Also ironic is when he calls his passion

an “unnatural stimulus” (Shelley 58). Again, the two meanings of the word nature come into question. Thus even in his use of the word itself, Victor reveals his sightlessness to the truth.

The dual meaning of nature is similarly revealed when the monster speaks. Clearly allied by nature, the monster uses it to destroy the DeLacey cottage. His “nature” leads him to commit the act, but one questions whether it was his inner drive or the outside force of nature that urges him to act out on his anger. Interpreted as a wretched, pitiful creature, one is compelled to think that the burning of the cottage is almost an outside duty assigned to it, rather than something it truly desires to do. Perhaps nature is also angry at the DeLaceys for shunning her “son,” and she urges him to use her materials – branches, bushes, wind, fire – to vent his anger. He even recognizes that the “mildness of [his] nature had fled” (Shelley 124), and one is left with two possibilities as to what the word “mildness” is modifying.

At the end of the novel, it is evident that Victor has only superficially learned his lesson. He makes claims such as “revenge kept me alive,” (Shelley 172) and he thanks his “guiding spirit” for sustaining him throughout his hopeless pursuit of the monster; still, he doesn’t see the truth of the situation. Nature has kept him alive through the monster. In fact, he even makes what can only be read as ridiculous under the circumstances – a plea to the spirits of nature to aid him in his quest:

I knelt on the grass, and I kissed the earth, and with quivering lips exclaimed, ‘By the sacred earth on which I kneel, by the shades that wander near me, by the deep and eternal grief that I feel, I swear; and by thee, O Night, and the spirits that preside over thee, to pursue the daemon, who caused this misery, until he or I shall perish in mortal conflict. For this purpose I will preserve my life: to execute this dear revenge, will I again behold the sun, and tread the green herbage of the earth, which otherwise should vanish from my eyes forever. And I call on you, spirits of the dead; and on you, wandering ministers of vengeance, to aid and conduct me in my work (Shelley 173).

Nature is not only cruel to Victor, but the text itself here is almost painful for the reader. The statement is laden with irony, and it only makes Victor look all the more prideful, ignorant, and defeated. He kisses and makes physical contact with nature; he invokes the spirits and laws he himself offends; and worst of all, he credits himself for his salvation. At this point in the novel, one knows that without the monster’s intervention, Victor would have perished. Furthermore, he calls on the spirits to aid him in apprehending the daemon that causes the misery without realizing that the daemon has been caught. The daemon is Victor, which explains why immediately thereafter, there is a “fiendish laugh” and the remark: “I am satisfied: miserable wretch! you have determined to live, and I am satisfied” (Shelley 173). It is then only appropriate that the monster, a creature created by parts dug from the *earth*, is destroyed by *fire* and has its ashes blown into the *water* by the *wind*. As a perfect embodiment of the four elements of Earth but an imperfect representation of humanity, the monster has fulfilled its only duty – to destroy its equally, if not more imperfect, creator.

The question now becomes, where does Walton fit in to nature’s ultimate mission? Is Walton a mere foil for Victor, or is Walton simply another instrument to tell the story that is ultimately told to the reader? Accepting the idea that nature is out to teach Victor a lesson, mere facts in the novel become coincidences worthy of examination. Upon stopping Victor from a pursuit that is hopeless anyway, Victor is placed in Walton’s path, arguably by the laws of nature. The easy explanation would assert that Walton needs to learn the same lesson as Victor, but this is an oversimplification. Walton is not nearly as ambitious as Victor. He seeks to explore the unexplored, but he never mentions that he wants to imitate nature’s ultimate duty – the creation of life.

In addition, Walton reflects attributes of both the monster and Victor. He starts the first letter by stating, “I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never

before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man” (Shelley 28). But then he goes on to say, “I have no friend, Margaret: when I am glowing with the enthusiasm of success, there will be none to participate my joy ...” (Shelley 31). To go back to the monster’s statement that Victor’s determination to live only brings him satisfaction further reinforces the idea that nature wants Victor to survive and supports him to torture him. But now, Walton’s appearance in the novel sheds light on another hypothesis - that Victor is kept alive to suffer, but also to tell the tale and become a teacher to others as the monster is to him. In this scenario, Walton becomes a messenger not only to his sister, but to the reader. Moreover, he is the ideal messenger because he presents a balance. He can sympathize with Victor’s pain, but he can also sympathize with the monster’s plight. Although he first feels pity for the monster and later banishes those feelings when he thinks of Victor, his pity is evident in the fact that he ends the letter without an ill word about the monster.

It is almost as if nature knows that Walton will abandon his bold and arrogant mission upon learning from Victor’s tale. Had Walton continued to insist on his dangerous mission, nature would never let up, and Margaret would never receive the letters on which the testament is imprinted. It is indeed when Walton decides to go back to England that the ices begin to move. Walton has resigned to his fate as messenger and abandoned his “hopes of utility and glory” (Shelley 183). In effect, nature has created a chain, as it does in other aspects of itself: the monster teaches Victor who teaches Walton who teaches Margaret who teaches the novel’s audience. The lesson, as manifested through Victor’s punishment, is comprehensible and unmistakable.

Perhaps Nietzsche understood the thoughts of the natural world when he said the following about the human intellect:

For eternities, it did not exist; and when it is once more extinct, nothing will have changed. For this intellect had no broader mission that would extend beyond human life. It is human, only, and only its possessor and inventor treat it as seriously as if the axis of the world revolved inside, it (Bleakley 34).

As possessor and inventor of the monster, Victor fails to see that his passion is a self-centered one, and he dies blindly clinging to the notion that his sin is the mere creation of the monster and the inability to apprehend it. It is evident that his sin extends beyond that. His thoughts prior to, during, and after the completion of the “fiend” show that he is oblivious to the crime he truly commits – trespassing the realm of nature, and by extension, “god.” His treatment of the monster and his actions thereafter serve only to exacerbate the problem. He continues to believe up until his death that the mere destruction of the monster is an acceptable act of contrition. It therefore becomes difficult not to label nature’s actions and reprimands as justified.

The Copernican system assures that “nature acts by its simplest methods, and chooses the most proper means to any end” (Mounce 127). But perhaps the self-destruction of the monster is nature’s apology for its cruelty. As an apparent student of the school of Machiavelli, where the ends justify the means, nature appears cruel and heartless. This presents a problem. If the supposed lesson calls for humanity to respect nature, nature must make amends for having claimed four innocent lives for the sake of punishing one man. Otherwise, it appears as an unjust, unfeeling, irrational power that is incapable of clemency and unworthy of human esteem. There appears no better way to avoid such a label than to spare Walton and to sacrifice the monster, its own son, thus establishing nature and its laws and powers as worthy of the type of respect that induces both fear *and* veneration.

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