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The Aftermath of Ambition

Mary Shelley’s intent in the telling of this story is to “contrive one [a ghost story] which would frighten my reader” (Shelley, p. 57). In order to discover how she intends to horrify her audience, the literary critic must discover *why* she was terrified of the dream in the first place. The first step is to analyze the historical context of the author and the novel. The evidence from this research provides a glimpse into the worldviews that influenced both the author and the intended audience. Mary Shelley’s dream was a catalyst to inspire fear in her audience by means of a critique on the implications of a particular set of the current worldviews. The inspiration for the story comes in a vivid dream about a man standing over his creation. Shelley’s method is through a commentary on her society, a society reeling from the consequences of ambition (Hicks). The main theme that intends to horrify the audience is that ambition will lead to destruction.

The story is told in a series of frames, each with parallel struggles and failures. Walton pursues the artic north, Frankenstein pursues natural science, the creature pursues the meaning of his existence, and the De Lacey family pursues justice. Through the structure of the novel, the reader experiences the theme in several different ways that build on each other. The story begins from Walton’s perspective, detailing his goals and dreams which can be summed up in his personal goal of discovery and the humanist goal of advancing society (Shelley, p. 64). As the story unfolds, Walton meets a man named Frankenstein, who observes these desires, and reveals his autobiography to prevent Walton from an inevitable demise. Frankenstein told the story of how he comes upon the possibility of creating life. He laments, “I seem to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit” (Shelley, p. 102). Blinded by his passions, he sacrifices his family, his society, and himself for his selfish quest. Frankenstein also relates the stories of his creature and the De Lacey family, in which the creature also develops a desire for knowledge (Shelley, p. 156). The story develops the declining character of each of the participants as they focus on their ambitions.

As Mary Shelley develops the plot, she fuels imagery and connections with the use of symbols. She challenges the ideals of her audience’s worldviews, communicating that her audience should be frightened by the effects of their previous generation’s actions and should be conscientious of their own actions. There may be some significance that Frankenstein uses parts of many once-living bodies that should be left alone to create his monster (Shelley, p. 102). In a sense, the story is a predecessor to modern science fiction, utilizing a commentary on the past and the present. She draws on the Romantic concept of nature to reflect the plot shifts or the temperament of her characters. For example, the night that Frankenstein gave life to the monster, she describes the weather as dreary, which compliments the mood of the scene (Shelley, p. 105).

The consequence of Frankenstein’s creature’s pursuit of knowledge is the deterioration of the monster’s humanity. Shelley devotes a large portion of the novel to the elements of observation, listening, and reading that converge to develop the worldview of the creature. However, the increase in his knowledge and experiences becomes proportionate to the increase in his disdain for humanity. Shelley then gives the monster fewer human elements and reduces him to the idea of revenge (Shelley, p. 212). As the story comes to a conclusion, Frankenstein suffers the same fate of deterioration as a result of his ambition. However, his deterioration transfers from his mental condition to his physical condition at his decision to forgo the creation of a second daemon for the sake of humanity. Frankenstein, in contrast to his creation, follows his conscience and, in doing so, becomes aware of the consequences for his decisions. Frankenstein chooses for the better (as would be viewed in the Romantic society) and claims a moral victory (Shelley, p. 212). Shelley gives a contrast to the victory of creating the first creature with the refusal to create the second creature in his appeal to reason for the sake of humanity. The conclusion is best described by the last words of Frankenstein, “Seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries” (Shelley, p. 260). These last words spoken by Victor convey the Romantic idealist worldview of pursuing happiness, but through the pursuit of peace rather than the attainment of achievement. Tranquility is typically seen in the Romantic society as a return to the simpler life, going out and enjoying nature as a place of rest and even healing (Hicks). The return to nature is one of the ideas in Romanticism that veers away from the impact of industrialization in Europe. The idea of ambition came from the combination of enlightenment ideology and the successes found by few though sought by many in the Industrial Revolution. Frankenstein gives a powerful warning through his story of how ambition ultimately leads to destruction. As the audience listens alongside of Walton to Frankenstein’s story, they see the fears of their own worldviews revealed. However, Shelley allows for hope for her audience in the fact that Walton has not carried out his ambition to the point of ruining his life. As the story ends, Walton does exhibit understanding and turns back from his ambition for not only his own sake but for the sake of his fellow sailors (Shelley, p. 256).

Given the historical background, the stated authorial intent, and the discovered method of communicating that intent, the theme found in the story of the book is a warning of ambition to a susceptible crowd. The plot events and the symbolism drawn from the historical time period draw the audience into the theme. The consequences of the theme, as seen in the post-Industrial Revolution society cement the intended fear into the audience’s minds, but Shelley leaves the audience with a glimpse of hope.

Works Cited

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