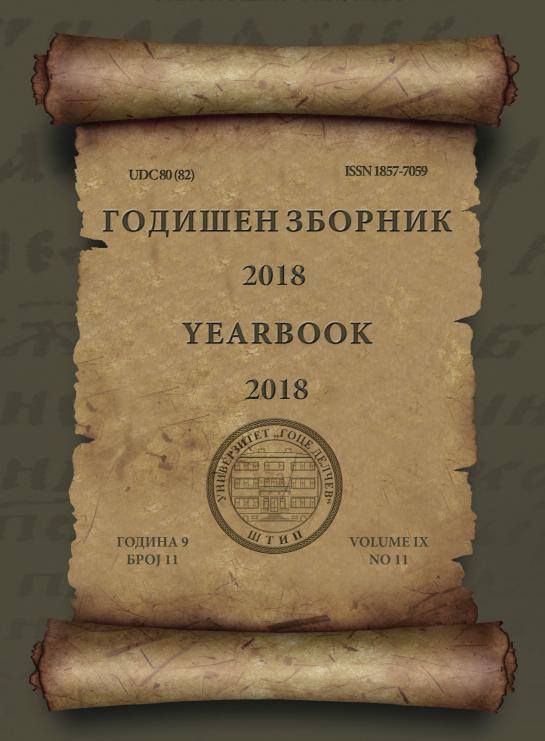
УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ "ГОЦЕ ДЕЛЧЕВ"-ШТИП ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ



GOCE DELCEV UNIVERSITY - STIP FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ "ГОЦЕ ДЕЛЧЕВ" – ШТИП ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ



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MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN AND BYRON

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Abstract: This paper examines the various influences on the young Mary Shelly in the composition of *Frankenstein*. The delineations in Shelley's novel reflect the moods and feelings of several influences upon her work. These influences include *Paradise Lost* and the myth of Prometheus, which Mary is to have read the year before the conception of *Frankenstein*, and most importantly her close relationships with literary figures, mainly her father, William Godwin, her husband, Percy, and her new acquaintance, Lord Byron. The allegorical composition of the novel provides for examination of all of these influences. To concentrate on one of these influences would probably reduce the value of the work. However, we suggest that the main impetus of the novel lies in the influences of Percy Shelley and Lord Byron. The personas and poetry of both men can be seen as reflected in the characterization of *Frankenstein*, but this paper generally focuses on Byron's influence.

Keywords: influences, protagonists, quest, love and death, revenge

"But words are things, and a small drop of ink, Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think;" (DJ, ill. 88)

Introduction

This epigraph presents Byron's idea of the role of poetry. The assertion that "words are things" emphasizes the immense impact of written ideas on the audiences, that is, its readers. This is one of the Romantics' well-known claim about the agency of texts which praises the power of the word to produce change through education and literacy.

Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* will be considered from the perspective of a quest. In fact, Mary depicts two types of figures and quests. The first type, suggestive of the poet as a quester in *Alastor*, is Shelley's type of character. His pursuits are beyond society in the search for meaning outside of human existence, in the novel depicted by Victor. The second type is the figure mirroring the image of Byron and his heroes. His quests for meaning and love like Manfred and the Giaour, are situated within society. But being withheld of these, they choose alienation from society and turn to revenge and self-loathing. This type of figure is depicted in the novel by the estranged, unforgiving monster himself.

Influences and the protagonists

Shelley's contemporary Walter Scott described *Frankenstein* as a novel which aimed "less to produce an effect by the marvels of the narrations, than to open new trains and channels of thought" (Remarks on *Frankenstein*, 2010, p.261). Lee Sterrenburg asserts that the image of the monster in *Frankenstein* manifests the anti-Jacobin propaganda, especially the depiction of her father Godwin as a satanic philosopher and that the novel reflects Mary Shelley's dismissal of her radical background (1982, p.143-71). More recently, Chris Baldick, in *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing*, has shown how her novel's creative daring has contributed to its status as a modern myth. But since the novel has become "a source for a pallet of later figures and works, it also draws from literary and intellectual history." (1987, p. 30-62)

Furthermore, Mary Shelley's position as a writer and at the same time daughter of renowned writers, William Godwin and Wollstonecraft, then her marriage with Percy Shelley and friendship with Byron provide for an additional psychological frame of reading. More challenging is some feminist criticism of *Frankenstein* as a displaced characterization of female experience, which depicts male sexual and political aggression. (M. A. Rubenstein, 1976; S. M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 1979; G. C. Spivak, 1985)

Shelley's journal lists the readings from 1814 to 1817 which offer abundance of literature on the French Revolution. She was imbued with her parents' ideas from a very young age (MSJ i. 85–93, 94–102). Although her parents' ideas impregnate her works, later on, it was Shelley and Byron's influence that provided her with a perspective that transcended national boundaries.

An evident outset of the relatedness of the character of Victor with Shelley is their common interest. In a letter to Mary's father, Percy Shelley informs on his youth passions: "ancient books of Chemistry and Magic were perused with an enthusiasm of wonder, almost amounting to belief" (as cited in Perkins, *English Romantic Writers p.* 1087). His intellectual interest almost coincides with Victor's studies of Cornelius Agrippa and other "forgotten alchemists," for which he claims, "I read and studied the wild fancies of these writers with delight; they appeared to me treasures known to few besides myself" (25). In this fashion Christopher Small has suggested, "Frankenstein himself is clearly and to some extent must intentionally have been a portrayal of Shelley" (1973).

Byron's connection with the monster is probably more obscure and has not often been pointed to. The reason for this may partially be critics who have commonly linked Byron with Walton and Shelley with Victor as a type of Promethean figure (Small, 53-57). Ernest Lovell's discussion on Shelley's predisposition to depict an image of Byron or the Byronic hero is directed to all of Shelley's later novels. Lovell delineates the feature common to each of these Byronic characters and the typical "Shelleyan hero". According to him, the common features of the "Shelleyan hero" are "blond, as the poet was, with light hair, blue eyes, and a delicate fair and ruddy complexion." The reflections of Byron's heroes, on the other hand, are often brunettes. He claims that "Byron is repeatedly pictured as. . . . mature and thoroughly masculine, as contrasted with Shelley, the unworldly man of thought and immature dreamer." (1951, p.165)

Mary Shelley depicted her monster as a repulsive creature. Nevertheless, it has been endowed with the beauty of speech, which links it back to Byron and his powerful but articulate poetic voice. Lovell's statement that Byron's "low voice of great beauty, once heard, never to be forgotten" is common for many of Shelley's portraits. He also asserts that "the impact of Byron's voice upon Mary became some sort of a symbol of the highly disturbing effect which his personality was able to exert upon her." (1967, p. 59) It is actually not the sight of the monster, but the sound that he produces that is suggestive of the Byronic hero in this novel.

Nevertheless, if it was Byron's voice that produced a "disturbing effect" on the author, then there is a possibility that Shelley's characterization of Byron as the monster is intended as a critique and a way for her to contest Byron through her depiction of the monster. One evidence for this is provided by Victor's reiteration to be cautious about the eloquence of the monster. The passionate rhetoric of the monster entices Victor, Walton and the readers into complete compassion with the monster. We see him as the victim of the unjust treatment by society, but we are inclined to disregard his violent crimes.

Shelley's awareness of the interrelatedness of birth and death meets the same concerns in Byron's poetry. *Cain*, although preceding *Frankenstein*, expresses Byron's similar views towards birth and death. Cain is aware that by giving life, he is giving death. Before he dies, he says:

Provided that one victim
Might satiate the insatiable of life,
And that our little rosy sleeper there
Might never taste of death nor human sorrow
Nor hand it down to those who spring from him.

(Cain, IH. i 80-85)

Byron's character asserts a similar unrest referring death that enfolds Mary Shelley's novel, in which birth arouses from the existence of death. The newly created monster is made of parts of dead bodies and death is the only cause for his life. The monster is conscious of the monstrousness of his birth. After seeing himself in the pool, he discloses to Victor that, "I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity." (pp. 98-99) There is even a physical link that likens Byron to the monster's "miserable deformity". Byron "came into the world with a physical handicap that caused him throughout his life much bodily suffering and mental agony, and that probably did more to shape his character than it will ever be possible to calculate. He was born with a deformed right foot" (Crompton, 1985, p.73). This physical deformity, like the monster's, is a result of his birth and links the two in a physical not simply symbolic way.

The violent anger that the monster exhibits, as typical Byronic rage, is captured in the fight with William. He depicts his rage when talking to Frankenstein, "the child still struggled and loaded me with epithets which carried despair to my heart; I grasped his throat to silence him, and in a moment he was dead" (127). Byron describes similar eruption of wrath in a passage in *Cain*. In a fit of violent wrath because of an unjust God, Cain murders his brother.

Enraged of being reprimanded by society for his endeavors to find love, Shelley's monster loses any possibility to acquire love and a place in society. His torture was increased by the sense of the injustice and ingratitude which society has shown. Thus, the monster is determined to have "deep and deadly revenge, such as would alone compensate for outrages and anguish" (126) he had experienced. Yet, similar to Byron's Giaour, his vengeance has little effect on rectifying the injustice that has been done to him. The Giaour, although in a dissimilar way, has been held back love in his life. In an almost similar fit of rage, he murders the person whom he considers the cause of his loss and torment. Yet, although he professes his guilt to the Friar, his vengeful act cannot be rectified:

Each feature of the sullen corse Betrayed his rage, but no remorse. Oh, what had vengeance given to trace. Despair upon his dying face.
The late repentance of that hour,
When Penitence hath lost her power,
To tear one terror from the grave,
And will not soothe, cannot save.

(The Giaour, 1091-1098)

Consolation is unattainable for the Giaour. There is nothing to alleviate his pain, just as there is no possibility for saving his soul. He is deprived of the chance to see regret and anguish on the face of his antagonist. Shelley's monster is provided with this cruel contentment, yet he is in the same desolate position as the Giaour. Byron's tale seems to propose that as a result of inhumanity and brutality of man and the absence of any benevolent force to repair injustice, vengeance and gloomy despondency are the only passages for anger and suffering. To a certain degree, Shelley probably supports this attitude, particularly the idea of the absence of benevolent power. The negative attitude towards Byron inferred in Shelley's depiction of the monster is suggestive of the fact that she does not support his options of violence and despair. Once the monster and the Giaour perpetrate actions of violence in order to provide justice, they deprive themselves of any possibilities to gain the love and compassion they have been denied.

It is the desperate passion of Byron's heroes that compels the monster to attack and murder William, and eventually condemn himself to perpetual despair. More likely than not, the monster would not have been created a mate by Victor. With this in mind, there is no reason for blaming the monster for taking the actions in a world devoid of affection and concern. It is this need for justice to be served that underlies the violent emotions of Byron's hero; especially this sense of justice which urges the Giaour and Cain to kill. It is exactly this sense of retaliatory justice which Shelley is pointing to in the centre of her critical attitude towards Byron. Byron's first speech to the House of Lords poses the question of how much violence social injustice has instigated. Byron questioned the conservative understanding of violent action as merely the result of innate criminality traits in barbarous men. Anne Humphreys has suggested that the type of the "nature versus nurture" discussion was regarded as openly subversive and socially unsettling at that time (1993).

While Byron points to the broad social conditions that have instigated violence, Mary Shelley portrays both, the creature and its creator, as accountable for the violence. But she depicted them with a difference in the degree. Shelley's criticism suggests that both the monster's yearning for sympathy and to be part of society, and Victor's desire to contribute something to humanity are counteracted by their deeds.

The passage where Victor and the monster concur that the monster is morally justified for having killed William is set on the hillside of Mont Blanc. This accord upon morality not only underlies the entire novel but offers a similar setting as in Byron's *Manfred* and Percy Shelley's "Mont Blanc". When Victor climbs the mountain, the awe-inspiring and majestic scenery offers him the greatest solace he could take in. The answer to the question whether there is anything to console Victor is left open-ended, just like the question in Shelley's "Mont Blanc" of whether there is anything at the top of the mountain. What seems significant in reference to Byron, is that Shelley is in search for a meaningful answer in the mountain, while Byron's Manfred descends the mountain to announce that there is no answer to be found. Although Mary shows a sympathetic attitude towards her monster's complete rejection of knowledge and his suffering, she cannot view the destructiveness and despair of his Byronic nature. Manfred's hopelessness and self-annihilation are not contributive to human life similar to the Giaour's retribution or the monster's rage. All eventually end up ruining not only their own lives and chances for love but also other people's lives.

The "Shelleyan" character, Victor, at the end of the novel remains like a Satan figure. He is unwilling to take responsibility for his actions as noted by Tannenbaum. Victor places all the condemnation of the Monster who like Satan blames God for his fall (1977, p. 105). Victor Frankenstein is a product of the Enlightenment who depends upon science for answers, not religion (Dussinger, 1976, p. 47). His transgressive deeds cannot be absolved by his repentance, as is the case with other trespassing wanderers, because the nature of his transgression goes beyond his ability to have control over it. His quest for knowledge results in his loss of control over his creation. Victor's complete relying on science excludes the possibility of trust in God so he is unaware of the parallel between himself as a creator of the Monster and God. Hence, he is unable to understand that like God he should be a loving father to his creation.

Conclusion

The idea of Mary Shelley's critique is not just to support or disapprove of either poet's ideas. One of the purposes of the novel is based on expressing the author's fatalistic attitude towards the pointlessness of human attempts to comprehend and surmount the limitations imposed upon them. This can be associated with the poetry of both Byron and Shelley. Furthermore, the novel illustrates the eventual insignificance of human ambition. The aims of the male protagonists in the novel are depicted as either the generous and philanthropic intentions of Victor to "pour a torrent of light into our dark world" in order to restore "life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption"; or as the basic need for love, presented in the monster's appeal for "society and sympathy" (119). In the cases of both characters, the Byronic and the "Shelleyan" one, their benevolent intentions are not important as they are subverted by their actions. This obliterates any possibility for the good which is their ultimate goal.

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