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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Scientific Heroism and Its Representations: A Psychoanalytical Approach to *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus***

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**ABSTRACT**

Heroism refers to the qualities or attributes of a hero or heroine. A hero or heroine is the main character or the sole protagonist of a story, who, though flawed, is often endowed with admirable qualities and displays great courage and bravery as the story unfolds. In *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, Victor Frankenstein is portrayed as a gifted scientist who has a brilliant idea of imparting life to inanimate things. But, as a flawed human being, his uncontrolled passion, has worked against his intention and he has unwittingly ended up creating a monster. The paper, through a psychoanalytical approach, analyses the power of knowledge on Frankenstein in a techno-scientific world. It firstly, discusses the different features which make Frankenstein a tragic hero. Then, it lists out and discusses the conflictual forces or flaws that have worked against Frankenstein making him a victim.

**Résumé**

L'héroïsme se réfère aux qualités ou aux attributs d'un héros ou d'une héroïne. Un héros ou une héroïne est le personnage principal ou l'unique protagoniste d'une histoire, qui, bien qu'imparfait, est souvent doté de qualités admirables et fait preuve d'un grand courage et d'une grande bravoure au fur et à mesure que l'histoire se déroule. Dans *Frankenstein ou le Prométhée moderne*, Victor Frankenstein est dépeint en tant qu'un scientifique doué, qui a eu une brillante idée, celle de donner vie à des choses inanimées. Mais, en tant qu'être humain imparfait, sa passion incontrôlée, a joué à l'encontre de ses intentions et il a involontairement fini par créer un monstre. L'article, à travers une approche psychanalytique, analyse l'effet du pouvoir de la connaissance sur Frankenstein dans un monde techno-scientifique. Il aborde, d'abord, les différents traits qui font de Frankenstein un héros tragique. Ensuite, l'article énumère et discute les forces conflictuelles ou les défauts qui ont joué contre Frankenstein, faisant de lui une victime.

**KEYWORDS**

Scientific, heroism, representation, Psychoanalytical, *Frankenstein*.

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**1. Introduction**

Heroism is generally associated with qualities such as courage, determination, self-sacrifice, and risks taking. Heroism has to do with "very great courage" and a hero is a person who is "admired by many people because of a particular quality or skill that they have" and which, in turn, is used to do "something brave or good" (Hornby, 2010, 703). "In literature, the traditional epic hero is often one who is equipped with extraordinary strength or courage, one who takes risks in wars in order to achieve glory and safety for the society he protects" (Shang, 2018, 5). Heroes are known to have qualities beyond human capabilities and for this reason, are considered as superhumans or demigods, with regards to the feats they display. According to R. Bhattacharya (2019, 111),

“heroes belong to the Fourth Age of man who were definitely superior to the present race”. For J. Haessly (2011, 1-2), a hero is someone “with greatness of soul”. It can be understood from these qualities that heroism goes beyond what human beings are expected to do. The word hero is commonly applied to many different types of people performing varying but brave acts. For instance, extraordinary acts of physical strength and courage, such as saving a helpless person from a burning house or diving into water to kill a dragon, are feats we would typically label heroic.

But it must be noted that physical courage is not the only component of heroism. Those who exhibit moral courage, such as people who put their own lives or reputations at stake to do or say what is right, rather than what is merely popular, are also called heroes. We even use it to refer to people who inspire others, even though these inspirations do not necessarily hinge on physical strength or moral superiority. In the same vein, Tony Sanchez argues that heroes:

[...] reflect our cultural values. Promoting the essence of heroes is to promote our own potential. They may provide an inspirational link that not only allows them to become part of our moral fiber, but also invites us to assimilate those traits and values that can make any of us a hero. Assisting students in examining the spirit of heroism is to invite them to adopt that spirit themselves, to embrace the qualities and characteristics endemic to the hero. (Sanchez, 1998, 6)

Heroes can also be those close friends or loved ones whom we admire and treat as role models. We routinely use the term for our popular and talented sports figures as well, whether or not their behaviour off the playing field can be considered heroic. A hero, in the context of this paper, is the main character of the story, who, though flawed, is endowed with admirable qualities and displays great courage and bravery as the story unfolds. In *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, Victor Frankenstein is portrayed as a gifted scientist who has a brilliant idea of imparting life to inanimate things. But, as a flawed human being, his uncontrolled passion, has worked against his intention and he has unwittingly ended up creating a monster.

The paper analyses the power of knowledge on Frankenstein in a techno-scientific world. It firstly, discusses the different features related to science which make Frankenstein a tragic hero. Then, it lists out and discusses the conflictual forces or flaws that have worked against Frankenstein making him a victim of his own hamartia.

To achieve this goal, the Psychoanalytic Criticism is used “to explain the hows and whys of human actions” (Bressler, 1994, 179). Considering the literary text as the artist’s dream or fantasy, it is extremely important to apply the principles and methodology of psychoanalysis to a text to uncover its real meaning” (Ibid.). For R. Kuhns (1983, 115), “when the purpose of the inquiry is to give a psychoanalytical interpretation of art, the object itself and its own establishment of reality must be the focus of attention.” The use of this approach will help dive into Victor Frankenstein’s psyche to get the meaning embedded in his “conscious and the unconscious levels, which reveals in what is said or perceived, the hidden and absent.” (Ehrenzweig, 2006, 86)

The paper has two sections. The first section analyses the power of knowledge on Frankenstein in a techno-scientific world and discusses the different features related to science which make him a tragic hero. The second section lists out and discusses the conflictual forces that have worked against Frankenstein making him a victim of his own hamartia.

## **2. The Representation of Victor Frankenstein as a Tragic Hero**

The issue of a tragic hero is a common theme in literature, in which a character has noble intentions but sows the seeds of their own destruction. Aristotle, defines a tragic hero as a “literary character who makes a judgment error that inevitably leads to his/her own destruction.” For him, a “man doesn’t become a hero until he can see the root of his own downfall.” For S. Ghosh (2015), “tragedy involves a tragic hero, one who is usually tempted to execute an action after which the hero’s fortunes ultimately suffer a turn down, ending with his [or her] death” (476). From these definitions, it can be understood that a tragic hero is a central character depicted as a noble figure with virtuous and sympathetic traits and ambitions but who ultimately encounters suffering, defeat and dies untimely of his own mistakes.

In *Frankenstein*, almost all the characters are adventurers, risking their lives by looking for something new, in settings that they are not familiar with. But Frankenstein’s and Robert Walton’s adventure – quest for knowledge, has been done in a particular way. This specificity implies their zeal to venture into an unknown world in a perpetual quest for knowledge in order to discover something new. Walton, whose senses have not forsaken him, comes to a stage where, his responsibility and human nature have enabled him to make a good decision – that of preserving his own life and that of his sailors against the angry and hostile nature characterised by its drastic weather conditions. Far from accepting to be engulfed by the snowy nature of the North Pole, Walton rather surrenders and puts an end to his perilous adventurous journey.

A number of features varying from Frankenstein’s right motivations, his good intentions to his talents and potential to acquire very swift knowledge, have led to his heroism. The same elements have exposed his human flaws which finally shoved him to his

downfall, making him a tragic hero. When one analyses the right motivations of Victor Frankenstein, it can be noted that he not only has an incredible mind and infinite potential, but he also has good intentions. As he confesses it “[...] with all my ardour, I was capable of more intense application, and was more deeply smitten with the thirst for knowledge” (Shelley, 1993, 21). These qualities are represented in most part of the novel. Indeed, he has a strong passion and ambition for his studies; which is the reason why the thought of creating life makes him happier than ever. As Frankenstein exclaims: “What had been the study and desire of the wisest men since the creation of the world was now within my grasp” (Shelley, 34).

No sooner had Frankenstein lost his mother than he moved to Ingolstadt University to further his studies. Through the dreadful death of his mother, he has witnessed the sorrow of death. He tasted desolation a few days before his departure for Ingolstadt and experienced an everlasting grief. An ordinary human being would be lamenting this grief at university but Frankenstein displays heroic courage and is rather galvanized by his motivations to become the greatest scientist, the world has ever had. He instead, goes through science and uses the tragic death of his mother as an opportunity to work out a solution in order to conquer mortality, the greatest of human tragedies. As he puts it “[...] but what glory would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!” (Shelley, 25). Science, for Frankenstein, should always work toward the benefit of humanity. If there is something humanity could gain through the use of science, it is nothing else but to spare humankind from death. This inevitability of death is part of the very first motivations of Frankenstein who decides to impart life to inanimate things.

It can also be seen that Frankenstein exemplifies the characteristics of a tragic hero, because only a hero guided by the best intentions could decide to free his people from the dreadful yoke of death. Frankenstein’s resolution to spare humans from death by inverting the course of life – moving from death to life, suggests that his original motives are typical of a tragic hero, that is pure and emanating from a human being. In spite of the fact that Frankenstein’s ambition and pride come in to destroy his primary motives, it can be seen that he, himself seeks to do good and to serve others, even better than himself. Here lies one of the qualities of a tragic hero, who despite the shortcomings, has always meant to do well, even when he does not do well.

Another feature which gives credit to Frankenstein’s heroism is his good intentions even if we know that they have led to bad outcomes. While publishing *Frankenstein* in the early nineteenth century, Mary Shelley could not have imagined seeing it become one of the most prolific horror stories of all time. Neither could she have thought to be introducing one of the most controversial characters in literature. What makes Frankenstein’s heroism so compelling is how very human he is. Unlike the dark villain who foolishly plays with the forces of life and death, Frankenstein is rather a good but flawed human being who unwittingly unleashes destruction and becomes the perfect example of the tragic hero.

Frankenstein’s heroism cannot be discussed without mentioning his talents and potentials in knowledge acquisition. So, the skills developed by Frankenstein to swiftly acquire knowledge, have played an important role in his heroic achievements. From his very first years at the University of Ingolstadt, Frankenstein displays both his talents and potentials to become a gifted scientist. His success in Ingolstadt creates more confidence in himself and he becomes more attractive to the study of ancient philosophers, discredited by the Age of Enlightenment professors under which he has studied. Frankenstein’s success in creating life proves that he has great and almost unlimited potentials. That is an important attribute which makes him a tragic hero – he exists beyond the realm of ordinary people. The tragic hero is not like the rest of ordinary people. He is endowed with extraordinary attributes that seem to come from some divine grace.

Frankenstein’s heroic determination, self-sacrifice, and risk-taking can be quite inspiring to many. After all the grief that his creature inflicted on him, he vows to kill the monster. He is determined and risks his own life by facing a monster in duels. He even decides to stay outside and wait for the monster while his wife Elizabeth sleeps in the house. Frankenstein describes this unfortunate situation as follows:

I earnestly entreated her to retire, resolving not to join her until I had obtained some knowledge as to the situation of my enemy. She left me, and I continued some time walking up and down the passages of the house, and inspecting every corner that might afford a retreat to my adversary. But I discovered no trace of him, and was beginning to conjecture that some fortunate chance had intervened to prevent the execution of [the monster’s] menaces, when suddenly I heard a shrill and dreadful scream. It came from the room into which Elizabeth had retired.” (Shelley, 141)

This shows how determined Frankenstein is to kill the monster but it has been too late for him and his bride. Yet, the heroic courage that he shows in his ultimate resolution to destroy the monster, is greatly driven to exert revenge for the death of his wife. While analysing the reasons behind such a show of heroism, one would conclude that Frankenstein is not a true hero but just a man who is resolved lately to correct the mistakes he has made in his quest to create something unique. Besides, Frankenstein’s courage is

not inborn; if it were, he could have spared the life of his people from the fiend. His courage is rather driven by feelings because it is until after the monster has murdered his people that he is resolved to avenge their death.

### **3. The Depiction of Frankenstein as a Victim of His Own Hamartia**

The inevitability of the fatal flaw comes as an important element which crowns Frankenstein as a tragic hero. Labeled by Aristotle (384-322 BCE), the ancient Greek philosopher, as the hamartia, excessive ambition, selfishness and arrogance constitute Frankenstein's flaws which bring about his downfall. These flaws have turned Frankenstein's limitless possibility and gifts into a curse in such a way that the more gifted he is, the more terrible his fall becomes. This has been represented in that, the more Frankenstein is devoted to infusing life in inanimate things, the more his pride destroys it. He has worked day and night to annihilate death but his animated creature has proved so powerful that it has caused more deaths than necessary. Frankenstein confirms the monster's supremacy in the following utterances: "[...] the strange nature of the animal would elude all pursuit, [...] of what use would be pursuit? Who could arrest a creature capable of scaling the overhanging sides of Mont Salève? These reflections determined me, and I resolved to remain silent" (Shelley, 53)

Unlike Walton, Frankenstein engages himself heart and soul in a perilous pursuit of knowledge. The strong ambition which lies behind this desire, has not given him the chance to think of the possible future consequences. He has been so committed to his research that he completely forgets his neighbourhood and ignores his supervisor. Frankenstein neither receives any advice from his lots nor makes any feedback to M. Waldman, his master and supervisor. This specific lack of attention towards his people, has misled him from his prime motive, that of finding a solution to death and freeing other humans from the dreadful yoke of death. The lonely, private; if not, the secret life of Frankenstein, has destroyed his heroic plans and drowned his brilliant intentions. This is his fault because he himself has worked for this privacy and has finally obtained it.

Throughout the story, ambition is depicted as one of the prominent tragic flaws which lead to Frankenstein's downfall. At the beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to a young and science-driven-scholar with the desire to discover new things. Even though this desire is very typical of a scientist in the nineteenth century, we are soon exposed to Frankenstein's obsessive nature.

Frankenstein's innocent ambition quickly deteriorates as his craving for knowledge takes over. This is foreshadowed when he states that "It was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn" (Shelley, 22). From this utterance, it can be seen that Frankenstein seeks knowledge that no other individual has yet discovered. This could also be perceived as Frankenstein's desire to be godlike. While attending university, Frankenstein tries to hide his obsessive desire but continues to let it grow. This obsessive ambition for knowledge takes him on a quest to create life, resulting in the creation of the monster. M. W. Sayres (2017) has foreseen Frankenstein's downfall when she argues: "Victor gets lost in his ability as a scientist. He forgets that although he may create something new (be it knowledge or life), he is not truly the owner of those creations" (37).

Selfishness is depicted in *Frankenstein* as another tragic flaw which has led to Frankenstein's downfall. Indeed, Frankenstein succeeds in creating life, but with all the risks and consequences. He regretted his act and abhorred his creature: "I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart" (Shelley, 37). In the process, he ends up being consumed by his excessive ambition and therefore, has disregarded his health, happiness, and even his family. Only moments after the monster is created, he abandons it without taking responsibility for his actions, whence his selfishness as a creator. This very selfishness is shown again when Frankenstein refuses to believe that anyone else has suffered a worse fate than he has, just after the death of family members and friends. It could be argued that Shelley crafts Frankenstein to be egocentric to display the dangerous consequences of excessive ambition.

The danger of his glory concerns Frankenstein's eagerness to create life and his inability to control its consequences. In his thirst for knowledge, Frankenstein disrupts natural order and brings about chaos in life. In the execution of his dreams, Frankenstein is rather more driven by accomplishment than the sake of knowledge. His insatiable ambition to conquer knowledge and go beyond secrets of life, results in his chains of downfall throughout the story. In the analysis of the character Frankenstein, it can be seen that his pursuit of glory turns out to be a dangerous one, for, it goes beyond his own control. Frankenstein's attempt to achieve recognition and glory begins his own destruction. Since childhood, he developed a great passion for natural science and to achieve this goal and live fully his dream, he started collecting Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus' theories and submerges in scientific achievement.

At the university of Ingolstadt, his success in chemistry also builds up his passion. Frankenstein's improvement of the chemistry instruments marks the beginning of the achievement of his life-long goal, which is to create a human life. As he longs to dive deep into the secret of natures, he decides to create a human creature from his own hands. This utmost ambition compels him to avidly examine the cause of life and death, the structure of the human frame, and the principles of life. His fervent longing and excitement prompt him to the point at which he announces, "What had been the study and desire of the wisest men since the creation of the world was now within my grasp" (Shelley, 34). Thirst for recognition has blurred rational perceptions of what is impossible and what

is possible. Most definitely, Frankenstein's ambition leaves no room for his acknowledgement of human limits. The pursuit of glory allures Frankenstein to sacrifice his connection with the outside world, health, and diet while staying desolated in the laboratory.

After having discovered what gives life, Frankenstein assembles body parts from the corpses that he collects and starts to construct a human being. The prospective glory that is thought to be awaiting Frankenstein, incites him to exhaust himself in the process of creating a human. The same glory blinds him to the dangerous repercussions of his own conceptions. Of course, had he been aware of what awaits him, he would not have innocently created his own enemy.

Frankenstein's excessive drive for knowledge is his flaw because it goes against human limits and natural order. Although Frankenstein realizes that his dream is no longer possible, he does not yet see how glory captivates his life and consumes him to pitfalls – deaths of his surrounding people. Frankenstein's denial of the monster pushes it to kill William, his junior brother and charge Justine, a servant, with murder. Justine, on her turn, dies because of the wrongful execution. Instead of claiming the existence of the monster to spare Justine's life, Frankenstein refuses to act and remains silent and helpless, which proves that his creature, the monster, is out of control.

Another tragic flaw that has destroyed Frankenstein's achievements heavily revolves around his arrogance. He is bold enough to convince himself that his scientific knowledge and ambition make him invincible. Once again, we can see Frankenstein's godlike desires when he expects the monster to worship him as his creator. Unfortunately, the creature turns against him, creating destruction and chaos, which Frankenstein does not take responsibility for. This situation in which a creator is asking his creature to worship him, hints at the clash between science and religion in the nineteenth century, a prevalent issue that Mary Shelley could be raising. The end results of this clash also signal the dangers of science.

#### 4. Conclusion

The analysis has shown that Frankenstein's heroism comes from his ability to make use of his acquired knowledge along with scientific methods to successfully proceed to give life to a creature. Even though heroes sometimes do things that are not humanly possible, the fact that they are human empowers others to do the impossible too. The paper has also shown that the manner in which Frankenstein has tried to correct his mistakes has been heroic too, that is, he has shown superhuman courage, determination, and self-sacrifice character which are qualities that ought to be emulated by others.

However, the analysis draws people's attention to the danger of the flaws and imperfections that inhabit every one of us, heroes alike. Although Frankenstein does have brilliant ideas and motives – that of freeing humankind from death, he does not admit his weaknesses. Frankenstein's failure to have enough self-awareness, his strong desire for knowledge, his excessive ambition coupled with his selfishness and arrogance are the very tragic flaws that have led him to his downfall. In addition, the analysis of Frankenstein's character is a call to accept the truth when it comes to one's weak spot; notice other people's flaws, and by so doing, the concerned are also becoming more aware of themselves, this in turn, can help overcome their own internal struggles. The fact of giving value to this connection will make them remain wise and popular for so long.

All in all, the analysis has shown that the motive behind Frankenstein's futile resolution to destroy the monster was not worth of a hero, but rather of a man being remorseful for the mistakes he has made by creating a monster and abandoning it. Frankenstein's ultimate irresponsibility and leniency makes him more of a villain than a tragic hero, for heroes' determination, self-sacrifice, and risk-taking tendencies are not driven by the urge to correct their mistakes but to protect society. If he were a true hero, he would rather seek to protect his people from the monster than being urged to exert revenge after their death.

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