

Frankenstein – Mary Shelley: Chapter 18, lines 199 - 256

199 We travelled at the time of the vintage, and heard the song
of the labourers, as we glided down the stream. Even I, depressed
in mind, and my spirits continually agitated by gloomy feelings,
even I was pleased. I lay at the bottom of the boat, and, as I gazed
on the cloudless blue sky, I seemed to drink in a tranquillity to
which I had long been a stranger. And if these were my sen-
205 sations, who can describe those of Henry? He felt as if he had
been transported to Fairy-land, and enjoyed a happiness seldom
tasted by man. 'I have seen,' he said, 'the most beautiful scenes
of my own country; I have visited the lakes of Lucerne and Uri,
where the snowy mountains descend almost perpendicularly to
210 the water, casting black and impenetrable shades, which would
cause a gloomy and mournful appearance, were it not for the
most verdant islands that relieve the eye by their gay appearance;
I have seen this lake agitated by a tempest, when the wind tore
up whirlwinds of water, and gave you an idea of what the
215 waterspout must be on the great ocean; and the waves dash with
fury the base of the mountain, where the priest and his mistress
were overwhelmed by an avalanche, and where their dying voices
are still said to be heard amid the pauses of the nightly wind; I
have seen the mountains of La Valais, and the Pays de Vaud:
220 but this country, Victor, pleases me more than all those wonders.
The mountains of Switzerland are more majestic and strange ;
but there is a charm in the banks of this divine river, that I never
before saw equalled. Look at that castle which overhangs yon
precipice; and that also on the island, almost concealed amongst
225 the foliage of those lovely trees; and now that group of labourers
coming from among their vines; and that village half hid in the
recess of the mountain. Oh, surely, the spirit that inhabits and
guards this place has a soul more in harmony with man than
those who pile the glacier, or retire to the inaccessible peaks of
230 the mountains of our own country.'

Clerval! beloved friend! even now it delights me to record
your words, and to dwell on the praise of which you are so
eminently deserving. He was a being formed in the 'very poetry
of nature'. His wild and enthusiastic imagination was chastened
235 by the sensibility of his heart. His soul overflowed with ardent
affections, and his friendship was of that devoted and wondrous
nature that the worldly-minded teach us to look for only in the
imagination. But even human sympathies were not sufficient to
satisfy his eager mind. The scenery of external nature, which
240 others regard only with admiration, he loved with ardour: -

The sounding cataract
Haunted him like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to him
245 An appetite; a feeling, and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, or any interest
Unborrow'd from the eye.¹

And where does he now exist? Is this gentle and lovely being
250 lost for ever? Has this mind, so replete with ideas, imaginations
fanciful and magnificent, which formed a world, whose exist-
ence depended on the life of its creator - has the mind perished?
Does it now only exist in my memory? No, it is not thus;
your form so divinely wrought, and beaming with beauty, has
255 decayed, but your spirit still visits and consoles your unhappy
friend.

¹ Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* [author's footnote]

**Provide a close textual analysis of *Frankenstein*
(chapter 18, lines 199 – 256) by Mary Shelley**

Chapters 18 and 19 are concerned with Victor Frankenstein's journey from Geneva to Scotland with his companion Henry Clerval with the sole purpose of doing the monster's bidding by creating a female partner for him. In this passage the travellers are in the Rhine Valley, and Victor has an opportunity to reflect on his personal situation in relation to the natural world. Victor's gloominess is set against Clerval's optimism and apparently insatiable thirst for nature.

The excerpt starts as a simple narrative with Victor recounting a conversation with Clerval, of which much is made up of Clerval's own words. At line 231 the narrator's perspective shifts and becomes more concerned with himself and his own view of Clerval's delight with nature. The depth and sincerity of his feelings are shown through the inclusion of the 'highest' literary form – a portion of Wordsworth's poem *Tintern Abbey*. After the aesthetically pleasing poetical language, the perspective of Victor's narration shifts again, moving to his present in which Clerval has been murdered and he mourns the loss to the world.

Spending two chapters describing the journey is in keeping with the priorities of the age. At a time when the Grand Tour was a standard part of the education of the wealthy, such geographical data was important to literary readers. The journey through the Rhine also has an autobiographical element as it had been part of the route taken by Mary Godwin and Percy Shelley from Switzerland back to England in 1814 (Stahmer, 2001, p1). There are several place names, including Lucerne and Uri, to be found in common between *Frankenstein* and Mary Shelley's *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (Shelley, 1817, p3)

The language of the passage is very dramatic and the images of the natural world are created vividly for the reader in stark contrast to Frankenstein's bleakness. After the poem, the language changes and becomes very introverted with short punctuated statements giving the feeling of Frankenstein, as the

narrator, panting through the words after the exertions of his passionate description of Clerval's world and their friendship.

The inclusion of the poetry towards the end of the passage serves to exemplify the "ardour" with which Clerval looked at the nature around him. Its very language and structure transcend the prose surrounding it, and mirror the description of Clerval as being above the natural world and its mundanity, having been "formed in the very poetry of nature" (line 243). This phrase, borrowed from Leigh Hunt's *A Story of Rimini*, and the description of Clerval's form as "divinely wrought" (line 254) serve to emphasise the importance of a natural birth, and a God given right to life compared to the monster's creation. The words of the poem on their own do not just convey the exhilaration of nature they also conjure up previous images from the text: "the mountain" reminds the reader of Frankenstein chasing the monster through the Swiss mountains, and "the deep and gloomy wood" harks back to the creature's existence foraging in the wood. The idea of being "haunted" is applicable to Frankenstein too, while Clerval was haunted with "a passion", he is haunted by the creature's existence and his promise to create him a partner.

Clerval compares the inspiring awfulness of everything he has previously seen to the beauty of the Rhine, but his descriptions also relate to Frankenstein's experiences and feelings. The "black and impenetrable shades" (line 210) cast by the mountains is a tidy summary of his mental state carrying the burden of knowing he created the monster and that he is ultimately responsible for the deaths in the novel. As the lake is "agitated", the monster's existence has agitated his life, and as the "priest and his mistress were overwhelmed" (line 216) he is now wholly overwhelmed by the responsibility placed on him as the monster's creator with which he cannot cope. Their "dying voices" (line 217) which can only be heard when it is quiet reflect on the way in which Frankenstein must be relating the story to Walton as he lies close to death in a ship at the whim of the natural world.

When Clerval refers to the soul of the Rhine as being:

"more in harmony with man than those who pile the glacier, or retire to the inaccessible peaks of the mountains" (line 227)

he is encapsulating Frankenstein's problem as Frankenstein has set himself apart from the rest of mankind having spent time in the "inaccessible peaks" with the creature. He is now in discord with both man and the natural world as a result of his association with the inharmonious elements of nature. This is diametrically opposed to the separation from man experienced by Clerval travelling down the Rhine, whose "happiness [is] seldom tasted by man" (line 206).

Frankenstein describes Clerval's "wild and enthusiastic imagination" as being "chastened by the sensibility of his heart" (line 234), this gives a sense of regret that his own experimentation was not tempered, thereby avoiding the bloodshed and the ruining of his own life. On a grander scale this could also be seen to rue the movement from the rigid defined limits of the Classical age to the Romantic era. The friendship that Clerval offered Frankenstein was, quite literally, 'out of this world', as it was of the type that the "worldly-minded teach us to look for only in the imagination" (line 237). As Frankenstein looked beyond the natural order of this world to give life to the monster, other people could only imagine the strength of his relationship with Clerval.

Frankenstein acknowledges that the existence of the beautiful world in which Clerval lived "depended on the life of its creator". The concept of dependency occurs frequently within this novel: for example, the monster is dependent on Frankenstein for a partner, Frankenstein is dependent on Clerval when he is ill and on Walton when chasing the creature towards the North Pole. As the existence of Clerval's world is dependent on its creator, his own existence is also dependent on a creator, but in this case the creator of the monster.

As a whole, this passage contains elements of many of the themes of the novel: responsibility, the nature of life, social relationships, and the overreaching ambition of mankind. It also serves to bring the Romantic and Gothic aspects of the novel together.

(1057 words)

Bibliography and References

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