

LIFE AND DEATH IMAGERY IN “FRANKESTEIN, OR THE MODERN PROMETHEUS”

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Death is not an easy topic to approach. No other human experience generates a greater sense of apprehension and uncertainty than death.

Death remains in the modern Western context, a source of alienation and separation. It is understood as nothing, a void, a terrifying and sinister ending whose only meaning is that there is no meaning. The meaninglessness of death in modern societies has much to do with the meaninglessness of life.

Even if humans are born with the death penalty attached, they try to push death to the outermost margins of their lives. And this fact can be noticed especially on the language level, by using several methods to avoid death-related language (euphemisms, dysphemisms or jokes).

Mary Shelley's characters explore this modern void: on one hand, Victor Frankenstein looks into the eyes of his tortured attempt to conquer death and paid with his life; and on the other hand, the explorer looks for the first time at the mortal faces of his frightened crew and discovered that they could no longer simply be instruments of his quest for immortality.

Frankenstein is a novel haunted by the spectre of death. Death has touched each chapter of the novel: first Walton recounts how he inherited a fortune upon the death of an unnamed cousin, the decline of Alphonse Frankenstein's friend Beaufort, the sudden demise of Caroline Frankenstein, Victor's nocturnal visits to vaults and charnel houses, his association of his Creature with mummies and ghouls, the death of William and Henry Clerval, the execution of Justine, the death of Elizabeth and finally the deaths of Victor and his Creature.

As the readers to be able to face so many deaths, the author tries to discover several methods meant to help them in their journey throughout the novel. Antithesis, invectives, exclamations, apostrophes, rhetorical questions, synonymy, antonymy as well as metaphors included in euphemistical expressions are cooperating in creating a text divided into two pieces: one that belongs to the principle of Life and the other one belonging to Death.

If Life is always bright and represented by women, due to their fertility and power of giving life, Death is always dark and cold and is represented by men.

My paper has in view the antithesis Life *versus* Death within the dreams, with a special focus on its elements that can be noticed not only on the lexical level but also on the phonological and syntactical level.

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, there are at least two levels of "dream"¹⁷⁵ for Frankenstein. The first, which is given a dream-like quality by his resistance that is not *the vision of a madman*, is his hopeful daydream of what the creation of a human life through science might ultimately mean:

"Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species will bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. Pursuing these reflections, I thought, if I could bestow animation on lifeless matter, I might in the process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption." (p. 63)

There is so much ego in Victor's hubris (the repeated usage of the personal pronoun *I* and *me*) that Frankenstein is an attack on scientific aspiration. The reader can encounter a deep gap between Victor – the creator and the rest – *the dark world*, where he will pour a *torrent of light* (metaphor for life). This antithesis between him and those he *might* manipulate and create, represents the opposition between Life and Death. The author always divides his paragraphs in antithetic elements in order to emphasize one through the other.

There is a real bound between Life and Death just like between the creator and his creature. At a closer look, the reader can notice on the language level, that the paragraph may be divided in elements specific both for Life and Death; their disposal within the paragraph is made according to the principle of opposition. If at the beginning, the elements reflecting the idea of life or death are euphemistical expressions, in the end the author gives up on them and prefers to use a direct language.

Life is a *torrent of light* (metaphor of life) that might be poured in our *dark world* (metaphor of death) or it may represent the action of *bestowing animation upon lifeless matter*.

This is the vision to which Victor refers when he speaks about his hope that his creation might be *beautiful*, when he later laments on actually seeing his creature coming. *The beauty the dream* is replaced by horror and disgust at a wretch more hideous than a mummy again endued with animation.

The problems that Victor's conscious dream present, however, are greatly complicated when we recall that there is a second, more preconscious dream (a nightmare) into which Victor falls.

Right after he recoils from the first night of his finished, and now breathing creation, Frankenstein *rushes* in frightened disgust from his makeshift laboratory, throws himself on his bed, with his most conscious thoughts of escape from his problems:

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Jerrold E. Hogle, *Frankenstein's Dream: An Introduction*, see: <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/>

“I slept indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams. I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought I beheld the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window-shutters, I beheld the wretch – the miserable monster whom I had created.” (p. 70)

It is significant that Victor dreams of his mother and Elizabeth; as women, they are both “naturally” capable of creation (through giving birth). With their deaths, the natural creation and earthly virtue they represent dies as well. Victor’s kiss is the kiss of death and his later marriage to Elizabeth is represented as being equivalent to both a marriage to his mother and a marriage with death itself.

The opposition life and death is present again in the paragraph describing the nightmare. Again the author uses euphemisms that replaces the unpleasant or tough words when speaking about death, but she also succeeds in creating images that suggest the idea of life or death associated with fear.

A single image that suggests life faces all the images that suggest the presence of death:

Bloom of health (metaphor) is overwhelmed by the images suggesting death: *corpse, kiss, livid, hue of death, grave-worms, cold, horror, my teeth chattered, cold dew, convulsed limbs*.

A great number of verbs can be found in this paragraph. It is interesting to notice that the verbs describing Victor’s activities (*to think, to see, to sleep, to embrace, to imprint*) are static while those referring to Elizabeth and his mother (the embodiment of death) imply the idea of transformation and motion (*to walk, to become, to change, to envelope, to crawl*). After waking up, the sentences become abrupt and shorter, coordinated through semicolons, indicating Victor’s nervous paranoid state.

Finally, the adjectives offer more details about the protagonist’s state of mind (he is *delighted* and *surprised* at the beginning but after he wakes up he feels a *cold dew* on his forehead and *his limbs* become *convulsed*).

Victor’s finished product – the monster – is revealed by his dream at the moment of “birth” to be a cover for his drive to return to his mother – to rejoin himself to her body. To do so, Victor has to enter into the world of buried dissolution (the charnel houses, graveyards) where his mother has been taken by Death itself and from which he longs to recover her.

The nightmare is a kind of silent film, where images succeed one another in a different kind of regression; eros (Elizabeth) becomes thanatos (*the corpse of my dead mother*), which becomes the face of the newly born creature. This dream suggests that Frankenstein’s unhallowed art has succeeded in infusing death flesh with the spark of life.

There is an alternance of dennotative language (when the author prefers a specialized vocabulary that tends to be scientific – references made to anatomy) and connotative one (when the author appeals to the euphemistical expression in expressing the inexpressible – references made to Death)

Thus, the reader is free to imagine an overworked, compelled, obsessed, brilliant scientist surrounded by horrific sights of body parts and machinery as he toils frantically to reanimate a patchwork creature as the reader sees fit.

But there are paragraphs where Life and Death are struggling to conquer new territories and the language becomes loaded with different connotations.

Bibliography

1. Jerrold E. Hogle, *Frankenstein's Dream: An Introduction*, see: <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/>
2. Shelley M, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, electronic version, see: <http://www.planetpdf.com>