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## The Rime of Frankenstein: Tracing the Albatross and the Mariner in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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### Abstract:

*Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* is a 19<sup>th</sup> century novel by Mary Shelley, which, over the years, made its way from the Gothic narratives to mainstream Romantic discourses and continues to be evoked in modern contexts, usually in reference to man's inventions, knowledge, powers, etc. One important theme of the text is a sense of guilt shared equally by both the Creator and the Creation and Mary Shelley often uses the image of the Albatross and the Mariner from Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' to evoke these ideas of guilt and regret. My paper tries to trace the Albatross and the Mariner in *Frankenstein* and establish the ultimate sin to be Victor Frankenstein's willingness to compromise on the quality of his work right from the first day of its conception, having killed the albatross before it began to chase.

### Key Words:

Mariner and Albatross, Frankenstein, Creator and Creation, sin and sinner, guilt, retribution.

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### I

*Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel by Mary Shelley, focuses on two characters, Frankenstein and his Creation, and the title itself demands, that the reader identifies the Modern Prometheus and his sin or 'transgression', even if the text does not explicitly do so. After the title, the front page directly moves to these lines from *Paradise Lost*:

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay  
To mould me man? Did I solicit thee  
From darkness to promote me? (qtd. in Shelley, 1)

From our knowledge of the Prometheus myth, we are sure to understand that these lines will be a reference to the Modern Prometheus's creation questioning him. Hence, right from the title page the reader is made aware of the tension between the Creator and his Creation, which shall be the driving force of the text. This tension is made intense by the guilt, regret, vengeance and anguish involved, and Mary Shelley uses some powerful symbols to bring out the full force of such a setting.

Shelley's symbols and allusions help to set the tone and mood of the novel and are very often derived from texts which she had read, texts which had influenced her or from texts which have been in the purview of discussions of her writer father, William Godwin, and his literary and intellectual companions. Thus, she alludes to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Aristo's *Orlando Furioso*, Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey",

Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", etc. Among these, Coleridge's work is particularly important. Coleridge had been a great companion of Godwin and although the two differed in ideologies, Godwin referred to Coleridge as one of his "oral instructors". Thus, Coleridge's ideas are sure to have been easily available to Mary Shelley and hearing the poet himself reciting one of his masterpieces, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", seems to have left an impression so deep that her work seems to be interwoven with the colours and shades of the poem.

“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is Coleridge’s longest poem, first published in 1798, in the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, often considered as an important marker for the beginning of British Romantic Literature. It relates the tale of a mariner, who during his voyage to the Antarctic, commits the heinous crime of killing an albatross, the bringer of joy. The Albatross is then avenged by a spirit and the mariner is left to a “life in death”, cursed to live and tell the tale of his crime, to repent unto death. Mary Shelley uses the image of this Mariner and the Albatross to deliberate on the ideas of guilt and regret that haunts both the Creator and his Creation in *Frankenstein*. This paper tries to trace the mariner and the albatross in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. This is done in three stages: first, by drawing parallels to establish analogous characters; second, by evaluating the way in which each character functions in the narrative and thereby establish similarities; third, by identifying the sin, the sinner and the repercussions of his sin.

## I

The first point of similarity between the two texts would be the employment of the frame narrative technique. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines 'frame narrative' as, “a story in which another story is enclosed or embedded as a ‘tale within the tale’, or which contains several such tales.” Coleridge’s poem begins with the Mariner stopping the Wedding Guest to tell the story of his voyage and that is how the reader gets to know the tale as well. The story functions as a cautionary tale for the Wedding Guest who is left a “sadder and wiser man” (Coleridge) at the end of the narration. Similarly, Victor Frankenstein’s story comes to us, not directly, but as reported by Robert Walton in his letters to his sister, Mrs. Saville. The story, again, is expected to function as a warning to the listener. “Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge” (Shelley,35), notes Frankenstein. Hence, a direct comparison would tell us that Walton is analogous to the Wedding Guest and Victor Frankenstein to the Ancient Mariner. If Victor is a shadow of the Mariner, then the Creature has to be that of the Albatross, the root of the sin and the cause of his guilt. In fact, both the Albatross and the Creature are referred to as “fiend”. Walton can be seen as analogous to the Wedding Guest by further considering the fact that, the Wedding Guest, who comes with the prospect of attending a new beginning (the wedding) was unable to do so, much like the novel, opening with Walton's prospect of a new beginning ending with him returning home without achieving his end. But the difference lies in the contentment of wisdom in one and the bitterness of failure in the other.

The presence of Gothic elements would be another feature common to both the texts. David Punter identifies the “three principal symbolic figures” which run through the Gothic works of romantic poets as “the wanderer, the vampire and the seeker after forbidden knowledge” (267). Out of these, the wanderer and the seeker after forbidden knowledge can be seen as collapsing into a single character in both the texts. Punter notes that the wanderer is both the hero and the victim, he is one who has defied God and thus has become a source of terror himself. Thus the Mariner and Frankenstein are both wanderers. They have both committed sins and are now haunted by it.

If the Mariner is “a living demonstration of divine vengeance” (Punter, 273), Victor becomes the dying symbol of a monstrous persecution. Both of them carry the threat of “the wholesale disturbance of the natural order” (Punter,274), both of them were indulged in the meaningless exhibition of power and in trying to know what was not to be known, transgresses the limits of human capacity and in their persecution reiterates human boundaries. Hence, Sara

Guyer notes that, “the human witnesses the human only in surpassing it” (79). This reading would therefore establish the Mariner and Frankenstein to be reflections of each other and because it is the Creature which is wronged against by Victor, by analogy, it has to be the Albatross. While plot similarity seems to create such a perception of the characters, it is also possible to argue that Shelley’s characters are her own creations and Coleridge’s characters simply form a part of what

#### 4 | The Rime of Frankenstein: Tracing the Albatross...

she has created. In order to justify this statement we have to analyze the ways in which each character functions within their respective narratives.

## II

*Frankenstein* as well as “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” has an icy and snowy setting.

While the Mariner talks of the “mist and snow” that came, Walton in his second letter says that his expedition is to this “land of mist and snow”, but his insistence that he “shall kill no albatross” (Shelley,12) is a deliberate attempt to set himself apart from the Mariner and his sin. But the Arctic and Antarctic framework is important in other respects. David Ward notes:

The ship enters a world of bleak, glittering angular ice in which dimensions are blurred...It is into this blurred, vertiginous featurelessness, the negation of the rainbow and the failure of directionality which underlies our sense of reality, that the albatross comes (94).

Hence the arrival and movement of the albatross restores the normality that was lost in the course of the expedition. So the scene of arrival of this creature marks a change in perception of the otherwise cold setting, “At length did cross an Albatross,/ Through the fog it came”(Coleridge).

In *Frankenstein* both Victor and the Creature seem to perform functions similar to the Albatross. Both Victor and the Creature appear as a suggestion of existing life in the otherwise barren scene. But, while Victor sets the normality, the Creature reinstates space-time order and at the same time questions normality, owing to its huge size. It is a source both of wonder and security. Walton notes:

This appearance excited our unqualified wonder. We were, as we believed, many hundred miles from any land; but this apparition seemed to denote that it was not, in reality, so distant as we had supposed (Shelley, 14).

But, the arrival of the normalizing force also has to break the force which stilled them and thus enable motion. This condition, set by the Albatross, is met by Victor Frankenstein. After Victor is taken on board, the ice breaks, much like the presence of the Albatross splits it. So, “The ice did split with a thunder fit;/The helmsman steered us through!”(Coleridge) is exactly parallel to “we heard the ground sea; and before night the ice broke, and freed our ship” (Shelley,14). Further, the Albatross brings with it companionship and a sense of society. This, in *Frankenstein*, is done by Victor and not the Creature. Hence, in this case, Victor seems more to function like the Albatross rather than the Creature.

The equation between the Wedding Guest and the Mariner would also create a similar blurring of lines. The Mariner is said to hold the Wedding Guest on his path with his eyes, the

Wedding Guest has no other option but to listen:

He holds him with his glittery eye-  
The Wedding - Guest stood still,  
And listens like a three years' child:  
The Mariner hath his will. (Coleridge)

This, in *Frankenstein*, is achieved by the Creature. He is the speaker who has the ability to choose his listener and charm him into listening his oration, Victor had to listen, “I consented to listen; and, seating myself by the fire which my odious companion had lighted, he thus began his tale” (Shelley,77). Thus Victor now becomes the Wedding- Guest and the Creature dons the role of the Mariner. This theme of the Creature being the Mariner can be pushed further by considering Sylvia



Bowerbank's statement that, "the Creature, is as sinned against as sinning" (419). Hence the Creature sins, just like the Mariner and Frankenstein and if Frankenstein is punished for defying God, the Creature does bear at least a part of the punishment.

The function of the tale narrated by Victor and the Mariner is another area of evaluation.

Paul Sherwin notes that "the tale is a monitory example meant for him (Walton)" (883) much like the Mariner's for the Wedding Guest. But Frankenstein demands that Walton goes seeking the Monster and continues his journey to the North Pole. He warns earlier against seeking knowledge that need not be known and must not be known, but he then urges the crew to go on, to "be men, or be more than men"(Shelley, 172). So, when Frankenstein says, "swear to me, Walton, that he shall not escape; that you will seek him, and satisfy my vengeance in his death" (Shelley,167), it is not similar to the recognition of the need for repentance, as the Mariner had at the end, but a deliberate need to destroy the manifestation of his sin. It is not similar to the Mariner's belief that the Hermit shall "wash away" the Albatross blood. One involves acceptance, the other a fervent denial. Janice Cavell notes, "Victor is ready to resume his mission of vengeance, and he is prevented from doing so only by death"(304). So, while the Mariner leaves behind the image of a man who was saved because he learnt to love, Victor is the image of a man who had to be cut off from the scene to prevent further damnation, and in this fever of vengeance the Creature is one with his Creator.

The Creature is vengeful and persecutes Frankenstein, this is where the image of the Creature as the Albatross falls to replace it with the image of the Creature as the plagues spirit. While the Albatross had brought comfort, companionship and reassurance, the plagues spirit is punishing, threatening and causing sickness, "Of the spirit that plagued us so;/Nine fathom deep he had/ followed us/From the land of mist and snow" (Coleridge). This is precisely what the Creature does, it haunts Frankenstein and then guides him towards his death. But, Ward claims that the Albatross and the spirit are "another and the same" (127). In that case, if the Creature is the plagues spirit it would have been the Albatross before, and within the process of this transformation lies the true understanding of the sin and the sinner.

### III

In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", there are two 'unintentional' acts, acts which have been carried without careful processing of its consequences- killing the Albatross and blessing the snakes. So, "...With my cross-bow/I shot the Albatross" (Coleridge) is an act which has not been thought out but was merely an impulsive expression of power, the idea of doing it coincides with it being done. Once it has been done, the Mariner is guilty but unable to seek forgiveness, he is unable to pray. Later, "A spring of love gushed from my heart,/And I blessed them unaware" (Coleridge). This action, although equally involuntary and impulsive, alleviates the force of the other act but does not erase it. Hence the Mariner's life was damned and saved by two acts which he did not and could not plan to do- one of them was the sin, the other was its atonement.

In *Frankenstein*, there are two 'intentional' acts- the creation of the Monster and tearing up of the half- completed Female Monster; and there are two 'unintentional' acts – making the Monster on a larger scale than human beings and abandoning it right from the time it came alive.

Out of these, first is simply a planned action which he alters in the course of its execution, second is an attempted correction of the first act, third is the sin and fourth a sin that is born from the earlier sin.

## 6 | The Rime of Frankenstein: Tracing the Albatross...

The creation of the Monster, unlike the killing of the Albatross, was a carefully thought out decision. Victor Frankenstein did not set out to build another human being right when he realized that he has possessed that supreme knowledge. He considers creating other simpler creatures, but because he could not find any harm in creating another human being and he knew he could do it he 'decides' to do it- here the idea of the action does not coincide with it being done. Victor says:

I hesitated a long time concerning the manner in which I should employ it. Although I possessed the capacity of bestowing animation, yet to prepare a frame for the reception of it, with all its intricacies of fibres, muscles, and veins, still remained a work of inconceivable difficulty and labour. I doubted at first whether I should attempt the creation of a being like myself or one of simpler organization; but my imagination was too much exalted by my first success to permit me to doubt of my ability to give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man (Shelley,35).

The act was thought out, but its repercussions were not- the social and moral implications of a human being created artificially by a man, thereby completely eliminating the role of a mother was not considered. But it cannot be considered a sin because it was not a mindless perpetration of evil, it was a well thought out decision gone wrong during its execution. He does not exhibit this lack of insight when he gets to choose a second time, that is, during the creation of the Female Monster, this time both the thought and the execution are accurate. He now takes himself completely out of the picture and thinks only about the society, he thinks, "Had I a right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations?" (Shelley,131). He considers all that could happen if such a being were to be created and finally decides to destroy it. This act, becomes an atonement for his sin, because he feels "as if a film had been taken from before my eyes, and that I, for the first time, saw clearly"(Shelley,135). This is similar to the relief that the Mariner felt when he blessed the snakes, "And from my neck so free /The Albatross fell off, and sank/Like lead into the sea"(Coleridge).The act shall relieve him, but the sin shall not be undone.

Victor Frankenstein's sin was the 'unintentional' act of making the Creature in a gigantic size, simply because that would increase his speed, "As the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed, I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make the being of a gigantic stature" (Shelley,36). Hence, he works contrary to his well thought out act and it is this impulsive act which becomes his ultimate sin. Barbara Johnson notes, "What was at stake in Frankenstein's workshop of filthy creation is precisely the possibility of shaping life in one's own image" (qtd in Guyer, 78). Hence Victor sins, not against God, but against himself by compromising on the quality of his work ; by rejecting his rationally thought out plan for an impulsive and unreasonable idea. He sins against the social order by making it vulnerable.

The second 'unintentional' act of abandoning the Creature would also appear as a potential sin that could be seen as parallel to the killing of the Albatross. It is after the Albatross was killed, for no misdeed, that it gets transformed into the plagues spirit that punishes and kills. The Creature, which began as an innocent being was triggered by both paternal and social abandonment to turn into a hunting Monster. The Creature says:

finding myself unsympathized with, wished to tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction around me, and then to have sat down and enjoyed the ruin...There was none among the myriads of men that existed who would pity or assist me...from that moment I declared war against the species, and more than all, against him who had formed me (Shelley,106).

Hence the Creature was pushed to sin by its own Creator, because he was not embraced and guided but was abandoned and shunned. If the understanding of the Mariner's sin lies in the process of the

Albatross's transformation into the spirit, then the understanding of Victor's sin lies in understanding the transformation of the Creature into the Monster, the reason for which, although immediately appears to be its abandonment, actually traces down to Victor's earlier sin of making it gigantic. It is because it was huge that Victor was "unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created" (Shelley,39), which forced him to rush out of the room. It is its gigantic stature which makes it a social misfit, which makes people drive it away. The sin of abandonment was an outcome of the earlier sin of inappropriate replication of the human figure, replication into a larger frame. Hence the Creature was doomed to be a Monster even before it came to life. And it is this combined force of the two 'unintentional' acts which makes it impossible for Frankenstein to be able to love again, that is why he cannot have the realization that the Mariner had.

Hence, by the three stages of analysis one may conclude that Mary Shelley interweaves her narrative with Coleridge's ideas of guilt, regret and retribution, but does not replicate them. Unlike the Mariner, Victor Frankenstein's sin was not against a divine being but against himself and his Creation, his sin was not that he bestowed life but that he "wantonly bestowed" (Shelley,106) it. And unlike the Albatross, the Creature shall never represent a "strange companionship"(Ward,76) but shall begin and end as a fiend.

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