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The Mad Scientist Trope and Victor Frankenstein

BA thesis

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to provide an overview of the mad scientist trope, including its cultural and historical background, its evolution, and to also analyse the very first mad scientist in literature. The text of *Frankenstein* is used for the analysis, as well as characteristics of mad scientists suggested by previous authors.

The thesis consists of a short introduction, a literature review, an analysis of Victor Frankenstein, and a conclusion. The literature review goes over previous literature that has been written about science from the Age of Enlightenment to the Atomic age and its relationship with society and religion. It also describes how the mad scientist trope came to be and how mad scientists have been portrayed in literature. The second part of the thesis contains an analysis of Victor Frankenstein, the titular character of Mary Shelley's gothic horror novel *Frankenstein*. It discusses the inspirations behind the novel and the role they played in shaping the story. Victor Frankenstein is also analysed, with the main focus being on discussing how he fits into the mad scientist trope. His cultural impact and contemporary relevance is touched on as well. The conclusion contains a summary of the points discussed in the two main parts of the thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since its initial conception, the figure of the mad scientist has become a relatively common trope not only in literature, but also in film, video games, and other popular culture. While they are nowadays found more in science fiction than any other genre, the roots of this trope can be traced back to gothic horror literature of the 19th century, when they first began to appear in literature. The publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* in 1818 marks perhaps the very first appearance of a mad scientist character in literature, although the groundworks that made it possible for such a character to be created in the first place were laid even before the novel was written. Mad scientists are the product of centuries of scientific advancements, ideas, anxieties, prejudices, and dread. The portrayal of scientists in literature and popular culture has always depended on societal attitudes towards science and it has been influenced by various factors throughout the years. The depictions of them and the changes that have taken place in the ways they are portrayed in literature are a reflection of the cultural perception of knowledge and morality of whichever era they spring from. The 19th century had Victor Frankenstein, the 20th century had Dr. Strangelove and others, and both of them can tell us a lot about the stereotypes attached to scientists during their respective centuries.

The thesis is divided into two main parts. The first section of it will trace the evolution of the trope from the very first appearances of such characters during the 19th century to the later and more modern depictions of them during the 20th century. This section also explains how and why the trope came to be, and why the depiction of mad scientists in fiction has changed over time. Furthermore, the evolution of science and people's stances towards it from the Age of Enlightenment to the Atomic Age will also be

explored, as well as the conflict between science and religion, both of which were necessary preconditions for the trope to be created. The final section of this half of the thesis goes over the characteristics of mad scientists, their two most prominent stereotypes, and how their depiction has slightly changed over the years. The second section of the thesis is a case study of Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein as a mad scientist. It contains an analysis of him based on the certain characteristics that mad scientists tend to have. His intention, capability for remorse and responsibility, and level of maturity, the characteristics of mad scientists suggested by Toumey (1992: 419) will be explored in this part of the thesis to show what makes him a mad scientist and how he perhaps differs from other mad scientists. There will also be a subsection discussing his cultural impact as a literary and cultural icon, which will explore the influence he has had on this trope, pop culture, and society's view on real-life "mad" scientists and ethically questionable scientific experiments.

Overall, this thesis aims to provide an overview of the evolution of the mad scientist trope from the Age of Enlightenment (when science began to flourish) to the Atomic Age (when the creation of the first nuclear weapon changed people's perception of science), and the ways cultural, societal, and scientific shifts have changed the portrayal and perception of mad scientists in literature. The character of Victor Frankenstein from Mary Shelley's gothic horror novel *Frankenstein* will also be analysed as a prominent example of the mad scientist trope and a prototype for other characters of the kind. By doing so, I wish to offer more insight into the ways in which literature reflects and shapes society's attitudes towards science and scientists, and to show how the mad scientist trope links literature with science.

LITERATURE REVIEW: THE BACKGROUND AND EVOLUTION OF MAD SCIENTISTS

The first half of the thesis goes over previous literature on mad scientists and their historical and cultural context. It is divided into four subsections. The first subsection goes over the evolution of science from the Age of Enlightenment to the Atomic Age, focusing mainly on how people viewed science. The second section briefly describes the conflict between science and religion that emerged after the Scientific Revolution and the role of this conflict in the creation of the mad scientist trope. The third subsection goes over the history of the trope and how it came to be, listing the necessary conditions that allowed the trope to be created. The final section describes how mad scientists are portrayed in literature, also showing what the differences between a modern and an older mad scientist are.

1.1 The Evolution of Science from the Age of Enlightenment to the Atomic Age

The mad scientist trope owes a lot to the Age of Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution that preceded it, as without it, the trope would not exist. The golden age of science was achieved during the 19th century and early 20th century, as these centuries brought about great advances in many fields of science. This was a period of great optimism: in people's eyes, science had the potential to become a beneficial tool that, when used properly, would greatly improve their lives (Tarnas 2010: 382). The Enlightenment also brought with it a change in attitude towards knowledge and the pursuit of it. The idea that there were some things that humans were not meant to know was deemed a weak superstition of the past, and divine reason, as opposed to divine revelation, became their new pursuit. Divine reason elevated humanity, because they could be their own god and

would not have to rely on divine revelation. With the scientific advancements made during the Age of Enlightenment, anything would be possible, and this new knowledge would give them the power necessary to cure the ills of the world, as The Center for Western Studies (2018: para. 4, 7) claims.

Despite this, not everyone seemed to favour the ideologies of the Enlightenment. Thus, after the Age of Enlightenment had been prevailing for a while, a new worldview emerged: Romanticism. This new movement seemed to be a reaction of sorts against the rational approach to understanding the world. Tarnas (2010: 395-398) claims Romanticism was a polar complement to the Enlightenment, valuing emotion and imagination over rationality and empirical science, noting that the scientist and the Romantic, despite both wishing to reveal the mysteries of nature, had different methods and goals for doing this. The scientist, he claims, only sought truth that was testable and concretely effective, whereas the Romantic wished to find sublime truth. Tarnas also adds that the Romantics criticised science as "jealous monotheism", comparing it to a form of idolatry which worshipped their own tangible worldview as the only possible reality. With these values differing so wildly from one another, some friction between the two was inevitable. The Romantics were sceptical of the Enlightenment and the worship of reason and, notably, science. Many authors turned to literature to voice their criticisms, with one notable author being Mary Shelley. The Center for Western Studies (2018: 1) argues that Victor Frankenstein is a representation of the Enlightenment, while his monster represents Romanticism, criticising the attitude of the Enlightenment through the fictional scientist. They also claim that in a way, it is a critique of both movements, showing off the flaws of both while using the main characters to mirror the tense relationship between the two movements caused by their differing attitudes. More characters like him would follow and Schummer (2013: 126) claims that the creation mad scientist was the most effective blow

in this cultural battle between the Enlightenment and Romanticism thanks to the stigma it brought. It was so effective, in fact, that the scientist vocation still suffers from the negative stereotypes that were established by the writers of these kinds of stories.

Eventually, the optimism that was felt towards science would begin to crumble and society would lose its blind belief in it, as the negative consequences of the advancement of scientific advancements began to reveal themselves. Could humanity be trusted with this much almost god-like power over nature? Tarnas (2010: 391) notes that although science had, for example, lowered mortality rates thanks to the advancements in medicine, and had also created the technology necessary for a more efficient production and transportation of food, it had, ironically, created a whole new problem for society: the looming threat of overpopulation. Furthermore, he writes that it had also become clear that it had a negative effect on the planet itself, with its water and air becoming contaminated, and the entire ecosystem being disrupted. What had once been a tool that could cure the ills of the world had now become something that had the potential to harm it instead, either indirectly or directly, as later developments would prove.

The anxieties caused by science would reach their boiling point during the Atomic Age when science had advanced far enough for the development of nuclear weapons to be made possible. Even before that point nuclear physics had worried people, with one specific example of it being a concerned citizen who had asked *The New York Times* if it could possibly "turn into a 'Golem' which could destroy man?" (Weart 1988: 33). Science may have been a tool in the past, but it had now gradually turned into a weapon that, when in the wrong hands, could cause unprecedented damage. It is as Westfall and Krige (1998: 2) attest in *The Particle Century*: while some citizens considered the development of the atomic bomb to be a heroic act at first, as time went on, it planted the seeds of doubt into the heads of many other scientists and civilians alike, setting the stage for future fears and

anxieties. Tarnas (2010: 392, 394) agrees, stating that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki showed that it was impossible for science to be morally neutral anymore and that scientific knowledge was, in excess, a very dangerous thing capable of causing mass destruction. This was not a new phenomenon, as science had been used to cause harm even before the Atomic Age and there had been countless inventions made with the intent to kill others. Nuclear weapons, which could potentially destroy entire cities, kill millions of people, and have long-term negative effects on the environment, are simply the culmination of all of these deadly inventions. This is perhaps the reason why Weart (1988: 37) claims that after the creation of atomic bombs, nuclear science and scientists had become a symbol of the dangers of science and technology. So long as there are nuclear weapons that could be launched at any moment, the public cannot view science through the same optimistic lens as they did during the heydays of the Scientific Revolution and the Age of Enlightenment.

1.2 The Conflict Between Science and Religion

After the end of the Scientific Revolution and during the advent of the Age of Enlightenment, it became clear that although most European intellectuals had remained Christian, a schism between science and religion had appeared and was rapidly growing, as is noted by Tarnas (2010: 280). The Church was losing its previously held power over knowledge and it was making them uneasy. This was caused by the change in worldview and values that came with the Age of Enlightenment, and a shift in values and authority. Tarnas (2010: 280) asserts that the Copernican triumph during the Scientific Revolution had already created friction between science and religion even before the Age of Enlightenment by clashing with religious foundations. It, therefore, does not come as a surprise that further developments in various fields of science during the 19th century only

served to generate even more friction between the two. Turner (1978: 357-359) specifically brings out geology, physics, biology, physiological psychology, and philosophy as the main fields that cast doubt on the previously ruling theological assumptions and portions of the Bible. The things in the Bible that were previously thought to be viable and were, therefore, not being questioned, were now being debunked by scientists. Tarnas (2010: 324-325) words it as science unveiling the eternal laws governing Creation and the divine handiwork and creating a scientific universe that did not match the traditional Christian conceptions of the world.

Although the original scientific revolutionaries thought of their work in terms of religious illumination, as is shown by Tarnas (2010: 471) when he quotes Isaac Newton's exclamation to God: "I think thy thoughts after thee!", science was slowly starting to distance itself from religion, despite the ties it had had to it before. Their differences in methodology, differing worldviews, and authority disputes started to cause friction between the two. The result of this was the eventual emergence of a new criticism of science: the accusation of hubris. In her article, MacDonald (2016: 3) describes the figure of the scientist as problematic to religious faith and claims that they were depicted as "playing God". She brings the character of Dr. Moreau from H. G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* as an example of this, showing how the laws he imposes upon his subjects are a parody of the Ten Commandments. That the mad scientists in fiction were depicted as playing God indicates that the public believed that scientists were moving beyond what was considered appropriate. There were things that humanity simply was not meant to know, but scientists were still crossing boundaries which humanity had not dared to touch before. Turner (1978: 361) adds that certain areas of inquiry were discouraged or condemned by the clergy and other religious figures, as they carried implications of impiety and blasphemy. Yet, humanity had begun to pry into such areas in their pursuit of

knowledge, uncovering things that did not match the previously held theological revelations. Schummer (2013: 114) brings chemists as an example of the scientists who were condemned for their work, citing Honoré de Balzac as having described them as "God's antagonists" because they were "decomposing all things" and thus destroying God's creation. Many concerns were raised over the motivations of scientists and parallels were drawn with the previous discourse over alchemy, the predecessor of chemistry. The debate was, in essence, over what should be classified as "true alchemy". Schummer (2013: 105) writes that writers supported the kind of alchemy which was based on morality and religion, believing that true alchemy was the Christian belief system or the search for God. This meant that any other kind of alchemical pursuit was not based on religion and was, therefore, wrong, just like modern science.

The wedge between science and religion kept growing, and according to Tarnas (2010: 330), it was the eventual victory of Darwinism and his theory of evolution that caused science to finally become independent from theology. With this, science at last pulled itself free from theology and was free to pursue that which religious teachings had deemed "blasphemous". However, Tarnas also notes that this did not mean that the West had lost faith in religion altogether. Rather, it would still remain a pillar of civilised values and social integrity, albeit not as strongly as before, since it was now no longer mandatory to be a Christian in Western society (Tarnas 2010: 339).

1.3 The Emergence and Evolution of the Mad Scientist Trope

It was the combination of the ever-growing fear of the potential damage that science could cause and that scientists were effectively "playing God" and disregarding religion that allowed for the mad scientist trope to be created. In a way, they embody the spirit of the Enlightenment, with their fervent pursuit of knowledge that results in the loss

of religion's authority and morals in the minds of people. Science was still a relatively new phenomenon and very misunderstood, and thus unnerving to the public.

The roots of the mad scientist trope can be traced back to mediaeval times. Toumey (1992: 416) lists wizards, sorcerers, and alchemists as being the mediaeval prototypes for the trope. Schummer (2013: 100) agrees, also adding astrologers to the list, and citing that not only had scientists inherited the mantle of mediaeval alchemists, but that they had also inherited their public image and, therefore, also the moral and religious criticisms of them. In some aspects, mad scientists and alchemists are very similar, in that they are both obsessive to a fault in their pursuit for knowledge, often disregarding morals in favour of reaching their goals in the process. In addition to alchemists, the name of Faust is also invoked rather often when discussing mad scientists. Toumey (1992: 417) dubs this tendency "the Faust reflex", clarifying it as the habit of calling every mad scientist story a version of the Faust story. Just like with mediaeval alchemists, parallels have been drawn between his pursuit of knowledge and the goals of mad scientists. Stiles (2009: 323), when clarifying the most prominent stereotypes of scientists in literature, goes as far as to describe one of the stereotypes ("the alchemist" as "a Faustian character, [who] obsessively pursues arcane intellectual goals redolent of ideological evil". As such, the mad scientist trope could be considered a continuation of the Faust tradition.

Another important facet of the development of the trope is the mid-nineteenth century correlation between elevated intellect and madness. Stiles (2009: 319) believes that the trope, in addition to being a continuation of the criticism of alchemy, also has roots in the clinical association between genius and insanity. It was believed that one could not be a genius and a sane person at the same time. Stiles claims that some authors believed that a larger brain and greater intelligence came at the expense of, among other things, moral sensibility. Millhauser (1973: 289) adds to this, quoting Jonathan Swift as having written

that: “It seems, the Minds of these People are so taken up with intense Speculations, that they neither can speak, or attend to the Discourses of others, without being rouzed by some external Taction upon the Organs of Speech and Hearing.” This only serves to prove that even before the 19th century, the public had believed that there was something wrong in the minds of geniuses and scientists. Stiles (2009: 320-322) also lists John Ferguson Nisbet as another author who had correlated genius with an illness, claiming that it was a degenerate brain condition. In addition to this, she claims that Victorians adopted Adolphe Quetelet’s “average man” as the evolutionary ideal while pathologizing genius, since any aberration from the ideal average, including extreme intelligence, was just as bad as being a lunatic or an imbecile. These strongly-rooted beliefs that geniuses were on the par with lunatics are what led to the long literary tradition of the negative stereotyping of scientists, which, in turn, was one of the preconditions of the creation of the mad scientist trope in literature.

Thus the mad scientist trope was created as a response to the growing concerns over the potential dangers of science, the pathologization of geniuses, and the renewed debate over the right way to seek knowledge. The Center for Western Studies (2018: para. 1) states that Victor Frankenstein, who is considered by many to be the first ever mad scientist in fiction, is a representation and personification of the ideas of the Enlightenment and all of its flaws. This shows that even from the advent of the trope, it has always been a critique of science. *Frankenstein* was what set the trend for all other mad scientists to come by providing the imagery and vocabulary that has been used to cultivate the negative stereotypes about the vocation (Tintori and Palomba 2017: 6). Not much has changed in terms of how the trope is utilised when comparing the 19th century to the modern age. Mad scientists have always been a way to put onto paper the anxieties that science evokes in society. Toumey (1992: 411-412) describes the stories utilising the trope

as being moral narratives that exist for the purpose of explaining where evil masquerading as science comes from. He also claims that the stories of the most well-known mad scientists are all a way for authors to shout "Beware of Science!". Tintori (2017: 6) agrees with the notion, adding that mad scientists always seem to be working on whatever the public fears the most at that moment. This applies for the modern appearances of the trope too, although the fields that these characters pursue have changed over time. Schummer (2013: 125) mentions nuclear physics as one of the more recent disciplines that mad scientists pursue as evidence for this observation. The mad scientists of the past were madmen going against God and building imaginary monsters in their secret laboratories, while the mad scientists of today are inventing weapons that might blow up the whole world. Despite their differences, one thing remains the same: both are cautionary tales on the dangers of uncontrolled science.

1.4 The Portrayal of Mad Scientists in Literature

Tintori (2017: 2) states that stereotypes are created in order to sort everything and everyone into neat categories in order to understand the world better. He claims that they are often based on irrational biases and may result in a negative view towards whatever is being simplified this way. Scientists are no less immune to stereotyping than any other profession. Millhauser (1973: 299-300) believes that one of the reasons behind the negative stereotypes associated with them might be the relative unfamiliarity of science and scientists, which persists to this day. He claims that they were (and to some extent still may be) an unfamiliar race of beings and that they simply did not touch the lives of people as intimately other, more common, professions might have in the past. The unfamiliarity of scientists is what caused anxiety in the public and their alien nature is reflected in the stories that have been written about them throughout the years.

Stiles (2009: 323) has identified two of the most common stereotypes of mad scientists in literature: “the alchemist”, a Faustian character whose pursuit of knowledge becomes obsessive, and “the unfeeling scientist”, who suppresses their humanity for science. She claims that mad scientists, at least the earlier ones such as Dr. Moreau and Dr. Jekyll tended to be composites of these two stereotypes. In addition to this, Toumey (1992: 419) has brought out the three features that can be found in most mad scientists: intention (the character’s motivation for doing what they did); remorse, reflection, and responsibility (do they feel regret and try to reverse their actions); and level of maturity (are they old enough to know better or are they young and immature). Just like Stiles, he claims that for a fictional mad scientist to be believable, they have to be some kind of combination of these three features, also noting that some may have benevolent traits, although they are not necessary and may often be neglected entirely. It is possible to analyse all mad scientists using these characteristics, regardless of when these characters were written. Tintori (2017: 3) corroborates the claim that many mad scientists tend to lack benevolent traits, pointing out that fictional scientists are sometimes stereotyped as lacking concern for the consequences of their actions and being willing to sacrifice everything for their experiments, thus abandoning morality in favour of scientific advancement. This, too, tends to be true for most mad scientists and has remained a staple in the trope.

There have been some changes in the ways the mad scientist trope is depicted in fiction nowadays, although they still frequently gain inspiration from the classics of the 19th century (Schummer 2013: 100). Weart (1988: 28) claims that modern scientist characters have gone beyond just literature and can now be found in other media, such as children’s television shows and comics, where they have become staple villains. The genre in which scientists most commonly appear has also changed, although it has remained within speculative fiction. The mad scientist trope was first introduced in the horror genre,

with the very first and most prominent mad scientist stories being examples of that genre. These mad scientists include Shelley's Frankenstein, Stevenson's Dr Jekyll, and Hawthorne's Dr. Rappacini. Millhauser (1973: 297-298) states that with the turn of the century, scientists began to also appear in science fiction, another type of speculative fiction, although the difference between the two genres is that in horror, they are something to be feared, while in science fiction, they usually bring hope and the promise of adventure. Still, the mad scientists in science fiction were also capable of reprehensible deeds. Such characters included Wells' Dr. Moreau and Dr. Griffin, and Lovecraft's Herbert West, just to name a few, although the latter blurs the lines between science fiction and horror quite a lot. It should be noted that according to Brantlinger (1980: 31-32), some people consider Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a Gothic horror novel, to be the first ever science fiction story, as it contains many of the patterns that can be found in modern science fiction, thus also blurring the lines between the two genres. Still, despite the genre change, Herbe (2012: 312) argues that from the 1970s onward, some science fiction scientists have, just like those found in the horror genre, also contributed to the mad scientist stereotype by systematically renewing the public's distrust of science and scientists and attributing malicious goals to them. Since these stereotypes have a negative effect on the way the public perceives the scientist vocation, there have been efforts by modern authors to produce more positive representations of them. Millhauser (1973: 293, 299) has stated that a new type of scientist has emerged: one that is harmless or comically ridiculous. The madness of these types of scientists is usually played for laughs. Herbe (2012: 322) has also pointed out that since mad scientists are traditionally male characters, casting women as scientists has been another strategy for debunking the stereotypical depiction of scientists as "mad".

ANALYSIS: VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN AS A MAD SCIENTIST

This second half of the thesis is an analysis of Victor Frankenstein and is divided into three subsections. The first subsection describes the historical, cultural, and literary context behind the novel and the character, exploring how various scientific discoveries, societal attitudes, and Shelley's own personal experiences contributed to the creation of the book. The second subsection is an analysis of Victor Frankenstein, focusing on him as a mad scientist and how he embodies the trope. Toumey's list of features of mad scientists is used for this analysis, describing how each of these characteristics can be applied to Victor Frankenstein. The third subsection is an exploration of his cultural impact and contemporary importance, showing how, despite the novel's age, Frankenstein's name is still brought up in discussions about ethical implications of scientific innovation.

2.1 Inspirations Behind the Novel

The cultural and historical context behind *Frankenstein* are important things to be considered when analysing both the novel itself and the character of Victor Frankenstein. *Frankenstein* was written and published during the early 19th century, which was a period of rapid scientific advancement and changes to the ways that people perceived the world around them. The novel was preceded by the Age of Enlightenment (also called the Age of Reason) and the Scientific Revolution, during which reason and scepticism became the most important values. However, as was noted before in this thesis, there were those who criticised the ideologies of the Enlightenment and the alarming speed at which science had begun to grow. Those who were against this cult of reason were considered the representatives of a new school of thought: Romanticism. Mary Shelley was raised on the ideas of Romanticism and as she grew older, began to associate and have many discussions

with some notable Romantics such as Lord Byron and her husband Percy Shelley (Pollin 1965: 98). The influence the Romantic way of thinking had on her is quite visible in *Frankenstein* and its criticism of the Enlightenment. Victor Frankenstein is, in a way, the embodiment of the Enlightenment: an intellectual who (at least initially) neglects their feelings and morality in order to pursue dangerous knowledge that has the power to corrupt a person. His monster could be seen as a representation of the consequences of unchecked ambition and moral irresponsibility, symbolising the destructive things real science might eventually end up creating if left ungoverned. As the invention of atomic bombs, a sort of "real-life Frankenstein's monster", and many other weapons brought about by science would prove, these fears were not entirely unfounded. Even during the 19th century, people felt uneasy due to how unknown science was to the regular public and this unfamiliarity bred paranoia and fears. Some took to literature to voice their growing concerns, with Shelley being one of them. Shelley's novel was the result of the anxieties over the possible negative consequences that science and its misuse might bring. By showcasing a scientist who, as a result of his scientific pursuits, is consumed by hubris and creates a dangerous monster, the novel serves as a cautionary tale and critique of the reckless pursuit of knowledge that is done at the expense of morality.

Other than the anxieties of that era, Mary Shelley also gathered inspiration from real scientific theories that were spread around that time. Galvanism was one such prevalent idea and is even mentioned by name in Mary Shelley's 1831 preface of the novel: "Perhaps a corpse would be reanimated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth." (Shelley 2022: 10). Ruston (2015: para. 4, 7) claims that galvanism was the result of Luigi Galvani's (after whom galvanism was named) discovery that a dead frog's legs would twitch when stimulated with electricity as if it were alive.

Ruston also goes on to write that Giovanni Aldini, Galvani's cousin, had attempted to also reanimate human corpses using this method and that in 1803, the corpse of a criminal he was experimenting on had, according to some witnesses, opened his eye, raised his hand, and moved his legs. If a dead frog moving was not enough to convince people, then a dead human doing the same was proof enough to some. Oates (1984: 551) claims that the idea that these discoveries could lead to life being galvanised in a laboratory was most likely accepted by the public due to the fact that electricity and all its potential uses was not quite as well understood as it is today. Thus, the discoveries of Galvani led to the speculation about the possibility of reanimating the dead, be it with electricity or through other means, an idea which Mary Shelley, according to the 1831 preface of the novel, was also aware of and which she discussed with her peers. However, the mentions of galvanism do not end at the preface, as Victor Frankenstein, too, is shown to have an interest in both galvanism and electricity, finding theories formed on them "new" and "astonishing" (Shelley 2022: 42). Having said that, it should be mentioned that electricity is not actually mentioned by name in the creation scene, with the vagueness of the scene being an intentional choice to add to the atmosphere of it. The movie adaptations are most likely the culprits behind this misconception, as many have shown Frankenstein harnessing electricity to bring his creation to life. In the original book, however, Shelley merely wrote: "/…/ that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet." (Shelley 2022: 57).

In addition to galvanism, the discoveries of Erasmus Darwin (the grandfather of Charles Darwin) also served as a source of inspiration for the novel and the whole idea that the dead could be brought back to life. Both Mary and Percy Shelley mention the scientist by name in their respective prefaces of the novel. Percy Shelley's version attests the supposed feasibility of the events described in the book by claiming that: "The event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed, by Dr. Darwin, and some of the

physiological writers of Germany, as not of impossible occurrence." (Shelley 2022: 13). Mary Shelley, in her preface, puts it thus: "I speak not of what the Doctor really did, or said that he did, but, as more to my purpose, of what was then spoken as having been done by him." The supposed thing that Erasmus Darwin had done was "preserving a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till /…/ it began to move with voluntary motion.", according to Shelley. (Shelley 2022:10) These two passages show that Mary Shelley and her husband both believed that the idea that the dead could be reanimated was not so far-fetched after all. Proof of this belief can be found in their personal life too. Percy Shelley once wrote that their child had been reanimated after dying from an illness and had survived for four days afterwards. In addition to this, Mary Shelley's mother may have also been brought back to life after she had attempted to drown herself. (Ruston 2015: para. 2,9) If the story is indeed true, then it would make her mother the second person close to the Shelleys to have been reanimated after apparent death. This combination of personal experiences and scientific discoveries that seemingly supported these experiences may most likely have inspired Shelley.

2.2 Victor Frankenstein as a Mad Scientist

For this section of the thesis, I would like to utilise Toumey's list of features that can be found in fictional mad scientists, these being: intention; remorse, reflection, and responsibility; and level of maturity (Toumey 1992: 419). Each mad scientist, from the very first ones created during the 19th century to the newer ones created during the current and last century, can be analysed using these characteristics, as they have remained relatively consistent throughout the years. Scientists and science may have evolved a lot during the centuries that separate the first mad scientists from the contemporary ones, but at their core, all mad scientists are built out of the same component characteristics, with

slight variations in these characteristics being the only things setting these characters apart from each other.

Intention can be defined as a person's reason for carrying out a certain action. In the case of mad scientists, it means the aim behind their scientific experiments. Toumey (1992: 419), when listing it as one of the defining features of a mad scientist, claims that intention is often used in law and morality when judging crime and sin. It, therefore, becomes an effective tool of analysis when dealing with this kind of trope where a character's morality (or a notable lack of it) is a vital part of their characterisation. The motivations of mad scientists are very varied and can be classified as either altruistic or at the very least harmless (Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll, for example, did not wish to intentionally harm anyone with his experiment and merely wanted to separate his immoral side from his moral one) or inherently selfish, self-serving, and harmful (as is the case with the more morally bankrupt mad scientists, such as Wells' Dr. Moreau, who lacked morals and had no sympathy towards his experiments). It is also possible for a mad scientist's motivations to change during the story, for better or for worse. A mad scientist may start out with innocent intentions, but may then become immoral only after their experiment has corrupted them. Usually, however, mad scientists' motivations tend to be more on the selfish side, since they have from the beginning been used to showcase the possible evils of science.

Victor Frankenstein's reasons for creating his "monster" seem to be a mixture of the two kinds of aforementioned motivations of mad scientists. On the one hand, he desired to help humanity find a cure for death, which is a noble goal. Frankenstein himself seems to see it as a noble goal too, claiming that: "life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world." (Shelley 2022: 54). In this aspect, his goal aligned with that of the Enlightenment, which sought to unlock the secrets of life and use knowledge for the betterment of the world. In

the past, many have tried to find a cure for death, including, for example, alchemists, although their pursuit of immortality has often been criticised as being selfish by some. Frankenstein's goal is essentially the same, though he never states that he wishes to become immortal himself. Rather, his wording ("pour a torrent of light into our dark world") implies that he wants to share it with the world, thus making his goals altruistic to some extent.

On the other hand, however, despite his goal being beneficial to humanity, there seemed to be some selfish reasons behind his search for a cure to death. In the second chapter, he reveals his interest in finding the Elixir of Life, stating: "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 2022: 41). This shows that he was not aspiring towards conquering death just to help humanity, but also for the glory that would come from achieving such an impossible feat. In addition to seeking prestige, Victor Frankenstein also dreamed of creating a new species and becoming a godlike figure of sorts: "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me." (Shelley 2022: 54). This is the most selfish of his motivations and ties in with the criticism of scientists trying to play God, which was one of the reasons why they were viewed so negatively in the first place. Shelley, when discussing a nightmare she had which served as an inspiration behind the character in her 1831 preface of the novel, also brings up the problem of pretending to be God: "For supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world." (Shelley 2022: 11). She, and other authors of the time, believed that the act of creation should only be reserved for God, yet Victor Frankenstein, a young and ambitious scientist, was trying to become a godlike figure by creating a new species which would worship him. This second, more selfish, intention is reflected in the

subtitle of the book: “The Modern Prometheus”. Not only was Prometheus punished for bringing humans fire (which is similar to Frankenstein’s own phrasing of his goals), but in Ovid’s handling of the Prometheus myth, the creation of humans is attributed to him, not Zeus, as some myths claim (Pollin 1965: 102). Overall, Victor Frankenstein was driven by a combination of ambition, scientific curiosity, and a desire to do the impossible and transcend the limitations of mortality. He did not try to conquer death purely out of an altruistic drive to help humanity, but he also did not mean to intentionally cause any harm with his experiment. This is why Frankenstein exemplifies the type of mad scientist whose noble intentions are overshadowed by hubris and a lack of ethical foresight and who unintentionally cause catastrophic consequences due to this.

Remorse, reflection, and responsibility are another measurement of a mad scientist’s character. As is the case with intention, these also relate to morality and may, in some cases, be taken into account too when judging someone who has committed a crime. Mad scientists are judged based on whether or not they feel any remorse or guilt for their actions and whether they try to mend their errors or if they remain indifferent to the negative and destructive consequences of their actions. All three of these can be applied to Victor Frankenstein and he is a very clear example of a mad scientist who both regrets his actions and tries to take responsibility for what he has done.

Remorse is the first of these three characteristics to be shown to the reader. Victor Frankenstein experiences instant remorse following the creation of his monster, being horrified by his unsightly appearance and the implications of bringing him to life: “/…/ but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart.” (Shelley 2022: 58). This sense of deep regret haunts him throughout the novel, as more and more of his loved ones are murdered by his creation. What had been an endeavour that should have brought him great pride instead turned into a

constant source of remorse. He laments this issue on page 89: “Instead of that serenity of conscience, I was seized by remorse and the sense of guilt, which hurried me away to a hell of intense tortures such as no language can describe.” (Shelley 2022: 89). The remorse becomes a source of motivation for him later on, although it takes a while for him to mature enough for this to happen.

Reflection is the second characteristic to be shown. After the initial shock of seeing his creation come to life, he begins to gradually become aware of the consequences of his actions after witnessing the tragic outcomes of his creation. He also starts to realise his role in the deaths that were caused by his monster as a direct result of Frankenstein denouncing him after he had come to life. In his opinion, the murders may as well have been caused by him and he would not be incorrect in the assumption, since the grief of being abandoned and not accepted by mankind is what causes the monster to lash out. After an innocent person is executed due to the monster killing someone, he realises that “not in deed, but in effect”, he “was the true murderer.” (Shelley 2022: 91). This belief would stick with him throughout the novel and his guilt only intensifies as he is forced to grapple more consequences of his actions, highlighting the internal conflict between his scientific ambitions and his moral conscience.

Frankenstein’s reflections ultimately lead him to seek redemption and resolution, which is an indication of the final of the three characteristics that Toumey proposed: responsibility. Not all mad scientists assume responsibility for their actions, especially the later ones, who became more morally depraved according to Toumey (1992: 412). Frankenstein, however, does take responsibility for his deeds, although not initially, as becomes apparent after the creation scene, in which he, “unable to endure the aspect of the being [he] had created”, proceeded to rush out of the room, leaving the monster behind (Shelley 2022: 58). He had spent nearly two years on this project and the results were not

what he had been expecting at all. His first response to seeing his creation is not to take care of him, nor is it to destroy him, but rather his first instinct is to flee from him and attempt to sleep to escape the harsh reality of his project being a failure, thus showing his immaturity and lack of ability to take responsibility. He effectively abandons his creation instantly, refusing to take responsibility for his well-being or to even acknowledge his role as his creator and failing to fulfil his duties as one. It is only after the monster first murders a person that Frankenstein realises that he cannot simply continue to ignore the problem and that he must confront the consequences of his actions. The first more serious attempt to take responsibility comes when he is asked by the monster to create a companion for him so that he may be pacified. However, he is still not mature enough by this point of the novel, and he ends up destroying his newer creation due to cowardice and fear of what would happen were another creature like his monster be allowed to roam the land. As a consequence, his first attempt to take responsibility was a failure and he unintentionally only made matters worse. This incident indicated that despite the fact that he regretted his actions and knew that what he had done was wrong, he was not yet mature enough to take full responsibility. This continues to be the case for most of the novel, as Frankenstein remains helpless when faced with the deaths that his creation has caused. However, he does eventually try to make things right, albeit only after the monster murders his wife Elizabeth on their wedding night. Despite this, by that point it is too little, too late, as all of these things could have been avoided if he had been mature enough to take responsibility from the very beginning. His wife's death is the final push he needs to take responsibility at last and marks the last stage of his character development. Motivated by anger towards the monster and intense grief over losing his wife, he finally embarks on a quest for redemption. The ultimate goal of this mission is to rectify the harm that he indirectly caused and to attempt to put an end to the monster's perceived reign of terror as a final act

of taking responsibility. In summary, Frankenstein's feelings of remorse, his reflections on his guilt in the deaths that were caused by his creation, and his gradual acceptance of responsibility are all used to build his character as a mad scientist who serves as a cautionary tale for others. His failure to take accountability as a creator right away shows the hubris of scientific ambition, whereas his eventual acknowledgement of his mistakes highlights the importance of accepting responsibility for the consequences of scientific advancements.

The last of Toumey's suggested characteristics, level of maturity, refers to how much blame for their misdeeds can be placed on a mad scientist's age or a lack of maturity. Frankenstein's level of maturity is questionable throughout the novel and despite his impressive intellectual abilities, he lacks emotional maturity. As far as his physical age goes, it is never explicitly stated in the novel, but it is possible to estimate thanks to mentions of his younger brother's age. In chapter 2, it is stated that the second son of the Frankenstein family (Ernest Frankenstein) is seven years younger than him. Ernest's name is mentioned again in chapter 6, where, in a letter from Elizabeth, it is revealed that Ernest is 16 at that point. Frankenstein had already created his monster by this point of the novel and had been recovering from the shock of the monster's horrifying appearance for the past few months, so it can be deduced that he was either 22 or 23 when he finally managed to reanimate the creature. Furthermore, it is also stated by Frankenstein himself that he had been working on this experiment for nearly two years, making him 20 or 21 when he began assembling the creature. His young age may have played a role in his immaturity, as with more age and experience (and perhaps more adult guidance) the events of the novel could have been avoided. Frankenstein himself, when starting his university studies at the age of 17, also brings up his age and lack of guidance, claiming that: "With a confusion of ideas only to be accounted for by my extreme youth and want of a guide on such matters, I had

retrod the steps of knowledge along the paths of time and exchanged the discoveries of recent inquiries for the dreams of forgotten alchemists." (Shelley 2022: 47). These discoveries are what eventually corrupted him, which is a very common theme with mad scientists. His hubris was also a sign of his immaturity. Hubris was often an accusation that was thrown towards real-life scientists, since it was thought that they were trying to play God through their scientific experiments. Frankenstein was no different – he believed himself to be capable of achieving impossible feats, and thus became consumed by his ambition to conquer death and become a godlike figure through his discoveries. He may have been intelligent, but he was also naive and his single-minded pursuit of these goals blinded him to the potential negative consequences and implications of his experiment. This also shows his emotional immaturity, since he did not understand why trying to create a new species that would worship him could be considered unethical and how it could backfire. Furthermore, he also failed to take responsibility for the consequences of his actions, as has been mentioned before, instead choosing to run away from them for most of the novel and only becoming mature and taking action when it was too late. Ultimately, his brilliance was overshadowed by his hubris, naivete, emotional immaturity, and the refusal to avoid responsibility. He was intelligent enough to be able to conquer death and give life to a new species, but too immature to realise why he should not do such a thing.

2.3 Cultural Impact and Contemporary Relevance

Tintori (2017: 6) claims that although most real-life scientists continue to showcase strong moral consciences by saving lives rather than threatening them, the Frankenstein myth that was established by Shelley's novel is showing no signs of dying out any time soon. His claim is indeed true, as Frankenstein's name is often invoked in discussions over real world scientific advancements, often in a negative way to condemn said

advancements. Not only that, but the novel and also his character has been adapted and reimagined countless times across different mediums, from film to comics to video games, and this will most likely continue to be the case for years to come, due to how recognisable his story is.

Frankenstein is a cautionary tale which prompts discussions about the responsibilities of scientists to consider the effect their work may have on society and the world at large. As mentioned before, the mad scientist trope is known for perpetuating negative stereotypes about real scientists and Frankenstein, as the first mad scientist, is also responsible for keeping these stereotypes alive and well. Victor Frankenstein's obsessive pursuit of scientific knowledge and his misguided experiment and its consequences have contributed to the public's perception of scientists and science, especially towards some more polarising fields such as biotechnology and genetic engineering. This has been observed by Herbe (2012: 311) as well and she claims that his name is a handy shortcut for discussing scientific discoveries. This should not come as a surprise to anyone, as most people are familiar with the story to at least some extent and the mere mention of Frankenstein's name is enough to bring to mind a very specific image of a scientist consumed by hubris who unwittingly creates a dangerous "monster". Because his name carries this much meaning, a lot can be said just by mentioning the name of Victor Frankenstein, due to the implications behind it. This is why he continues to be relevant even to this day in debates about the ethics of scientific research. A literal Frankenstein's monster in the form that Mary Shelley imagined him in may not exist, but unchecked scientific ambition has the potential to create something similar. For example, is the atomic bomb that was the collective effort of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb, and many other scientists also not a "Frankenstein's monster" in its own way, since both resulted in destructive consequences?

Other than his impact on scientific debates, Frankenstein has also influenced the science fiction genre. Brantlinger (1980: 31-32) quotes Brian Aldiss as having claimed that *Frankenstein*, in addition to being a gothic horror novel, was also the first ever science fiction novel. Although he also says that some would argue that its origins are more recent or older than *Frankenstein*, the fact that it contributed to the development of several popular science fiction tropes and conventions cannot be ignored. These conventions include the mad scientist trope and stories about creating artificial life and the moral dilemmas that come from such experiments. *Frankenstein* created a specific formula, one that has been parodied and adapted by many newer stories: an overly-ambitious scientist with loose morals creates something that ends up destroying life instead of helping it. These previously mentioned tropes are still found every once in a while in science fiction literature and other media and the tradition started by *Frankenstein* of mad scientists working on the things that the public fears has continued to this day, since the debates about the ethical implications of scientific advancements are still very much ongoing.

His influence on literature, film, and pop culture is also noteworthy. Both Victor Frankenstein and his monster have become incredibly recognisable figures in popular culture. Not only that, but Frankenstein is often considered the quintessential mad scientist archetype and may be the first character to pop to people's minds at the mention of mad scientists. He is important enough that Stiles (2009: 323) even claims that the "unfeeling scientist" is a legacy to him and that many fictional mad scientists have followed his example. Characters such as Dr. Jekyll and Dr. Moreau, as well as more modern figures like Herbert West and Dr. Strangelove all draw upon the template that was established by Shelley: a scientist, sometimes (but not always) with the intent to help humanity, goes against the norms set by society and ends up creating something destructive. All of them also share similar traits like megalomania, obsession, and the willingness to ignore ethics

in favour of pursuing scientific knowledge. In addition to inspiring a new character trope, the story of *Frankenstein* has also received countless parodies and adaptations, inspiring not only literary works but also films, TV shows, cartoons, video games, and many other forms of media for more than a century now. This has ensured that the character of Victor Frankenstein stays alive in the public's consciousness, as has been established previously, and shows that the themes of the story still resonate with the public.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to give a brief overview of how the mad scientist trope came to be and to analyse Victor Frankenstein, the first mad scientist in literature. The first part of this thesis, the literature review, shows that this trope is, unlike first impressions may suggest, the product of a complex combination of historical and cultural influences which helped shape the way these characters are portrayed in fiction.

Various different factors played a role in shaping this trope. Its roots can even be traced back to mediaeval times, with alchemists being the prototypes of mad scientists. In addition to its mediaeval roots, the Scientific Revolution and the Age of Enlightenment were also both significant in laying the groundwork for the emergence of the mad scientist trope. The Scientific Revolution sparked a fascination in scientific discoveries, leading to a cultural shift towards valuing scientific knowledge. The Age of Enlightenment continued this tradition, fostering a movement which valued reason and rationality over anything else. The anxieties and uncertainties that gradually emerged during this era also contributed to the development of the trope, since authors took to literature to voice their concerns over the rapid pace of scientific progress which had led to concerns over the potential consequences of unchecked scientific ambition. All the different weapons created using science gradually created unease in the minds of people, until, finally, the coming of the Atomic Age and the invention of the atomic bomb showed people what science was truly capable of when taken to the extreme and this is also reflected in fictional mad scientists who have found a new field to dabble in: nuclear physics. The conflict between science and religion has also influenced the way mad scientists are portrayed in fiction, since scientists were thought to be playing God and conducting blasphemous experiments. The earlier mad scientists were more affected by these accusations of impiety and hubris than the modern ones, since religion had a larger influence during the 19th century than it does

now. Moreover, in addition to scientists being accused of blasphemy, real-life scientists were also thought to be ill. Being a genius was just as bad as being a lunatic or an idiot, since it, too, strayed from the ideal "average man". All of these beliefs combined led to the creation of the mad scientist – a criticism of unchecked and dangerous scientific ambition, blasphemy and impiety, and those who stray from the norm.

Victor Frankenstein, despite being relatively tame when compared to some other mad scientists, still possesses the characteristics that these characters tend to have. He is a genius who becomes obsessed with his experiment which results in dangerous consequences. He is a personification of the Enlightenment and all of its ideas and flaws. He tries to play God, just like the critics of science feared that scientists would, and strives to create a new species, which is an act reserved only for God. Frankenstein also wanted to find a cure for death, both for the glory that would come from it and to bring humanity light, just like Prometheus. His intentions were somewhat altruistic, but the consequences were not, as his experiment got out of hand and his monster began to murder innocent people. Eventually, however, Frankenstein matured and decided to take responsibility for his actions. This sets him apart from some other mad scientists, since not all of them are troubled by their actions or try to take responsibility for the destruction they cause, be it willingly or unwillingly. Still, as the prototype of mad scientists, many others have been inspired by him. His story has also been retold and adapted countless times, leading to him becoming a recognisable figure in popular culture. Not only that, but the novel has also greatly influenced the science fiction genre, giving us many of the tropes that are rather commonly used in it. Lastly, he has gone beyond literature and is brought up in debates about real-life science, its ethics and its potential negative consequences, proving that the story, despite coming from the 19th century, is still relevant even to this day.

To conclude, although there have been some changes to how they are portrayed, mad scientists always have and always will be shaped by the public's relationship towards science and their view of it, as has been proven time and time again by Victor Frankenstein and all the other mad scientists who came after him. As stated before, they always seem to be working on whatever the public fears the most at the moment, whether that thing is a monster built by a man who is trying to play God or an atomic bomb that has the potential to destroy the whole world. As science continues to evolve, the lessons taught by *Frankenstein* seem to remain as relevant as ever in the minds of people.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Karoliina Anett Kompus
The Mad Scientist Trope and Victor Frankenstein / Hullu teadlase troop ja Victor Frankenstein
Bakalaureusetöö
2024
Lehekülgede arv: 35

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Käesoleva bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on hullu teadlase tegelastüüpi kirjanduses ning seda, kuidas see on tekkinud ning aja jooksul muutunud. Lisaks on selle töö eesmärk ka analüüsida Mary Shelley "Frankensteini" peategelast Victor Frankensteini ja seda, mis teeb temast hullu teadlase.

Bakalaureusetöö koosneb neljast osast: sissejuhatus, kirjanduse ülevaade, Victor Frankensteini tegelaskuju analüüs ning kokkuvõte. Kirjanduse ülevaade on jagatud neljaks osaks. See keskendub kultuurilisele ja ajaloolisele taustale, mis võimaldas hullu teadlase tegelastüübil kirjanduses tekkida. See kirjeldab ka seda, kuidas inimeste suhtumine teadusesse on valgustusajastust kuni tuumaajastuni muutunud ning toob välja ka religiooni ja teaduse vahelise konflikti. Lisaks on kirjanduse ülevaatest välja toodud see, millised faktorid võimaldasid sellel tegelastüübil tekkida, kuidas hulle teadlasi kirjanduses kujutatakse ning kuidas nad on aastate jooksul veidi muutunud. Teine pool bakalaureusetööst on jagatud kolmeks osaks ning see keskendub Victor Frankensteinile. See analüüsib teda kui hullu teadlast, kasutades selleks ühe varasema autori väljapakutud omadusi. Selles sisupeatükis on välja toodud "Frankensteini" inspiratsiooniallikad, Victor Frankensteini tegelaskujuanalüüs ning tema kultuuriline mõju ja kaasaegne olulisus.

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