

FINDING A WAY TO SMILE AGAIN

by

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“Unhappy man! Do you share my madness? Have you drank also of the intoxicating draught? Hear me- let me reveal my tale, and you will dash the cup from your lips!”

Victor Frankenstein, *Frankenstein: or, the Modern Prometheus* (1831)

It has been a long time since I read Mary Shelley’s novel for the first time. I instantly loved it, and I held everything in it dear in my memory. I am writing to relate a family story, which, when I read the novel again several years afterwards, kept coming to my mind, a most welcome visitor that did not stop urging me to capture the whole of it, as I remembered it, on paper. Memories! So stubborn, so delightful, so indispensable for human life! The book in question is *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, which I initially encountered during my undergraduate studies. This is the story that I wish to unfold, a constant companion to me every time I flick through the pages of the book.

15 December 2005: A luxurious flat in the midst of the industrialized capital Athens, in Greece. A man, a University Professor of English Literature, around 28 years old, sitting alone in the living room and reading the newspaper.

Man: Pf! Every time I happen to open the newspaper something unpleasant always seems to pop out! Wars and diseases, the global and national economy driven from bad to worse, fighting over political and market interests, deaths and suicides increasing every single minute!

Woman (in the kitchen): Oh honey, please, close that damned thing and get over here, dinner is ready. We don’t have to fill our minds with these concerns and ruin our appetite. The world will figure out a solution at some point, you don’t have to worry.

After dinner, the man stepped closer to the northeast window of their isolated flat and looked down the moaning road that criss-crossed their neighborhood. Traffic and noise were the only sounds that were heard, and the only sight the eye could catch were cars and desolate smoke, but, in the midst of the despair that clung around his heart like a curled poisonous snake, a ray of light cheered him instantly, as flashes of his youthful years warmed his existence. Memories poured forth from the depths of his soul, from an inner door that contained memories forcibly locked away for a long time. The scene suddenly changed around the man, and he was transferred to his old neighborhood where laughing and cheery children still played in the streets near his family home in the village outside Giannena. Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer used to pass harmoniously and without concerns, accompanied by memories from holidays when the whole family and friends would gather in the village for various celebrations and family events. His mind filled with such pleasant and nostalgic images, suddenly he rushed to the attic where all his childhood stuff were safely kept,

leaving his wife wondering what came over him. He searched and searched for various souvenirs from the past, finding a large variety of albums with photographs of family and friends, cards they wrote to each other during holidays, presents he had acquired over the years, letters from dear ones, books and toys. Tears welled up in his eyes as all his childhood passed before him.

While absorbed with reminiscing, surrounded by the spirits of his youth that whispered stories of happiness to his eager ears, he discovered a book that had been covered by several other books in a box. He curiously opened it, and on the first page, there appeared an inscription: "To my dear grandchild, from me to you with love. It was about time you read it too." While reading the words, he instantly remembered the moment when he was given the particular book. It was a snowy Christmas night many, many years ago when his grandfather, who was seen by the man to be reading this book several times during the course of his days and nights, passed it over as a Christmas present to his grandchild, wishing that someday the book will become a valuable treasure for his dear grandson. "What is so astonishing about the book that made my grandfather love it so much?," wondered the man who, in order to answer his own question, decided to read it. Feeling his heart young again, he opened the first page ...

Victor Frankenstein, one of the novel's two protagonists, became the man's object of speculation as he read the book. A person of great potential and an overambitious, self-centered character, Victor reminded the man of many instances of capable but, nevertheless, selfish individuals who proceeded with uncontrolled steps to the path of dangerous progress and glory without considering the consequences of their actions. "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 would 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" (52-53), says Victor Frankenstein; and together with him the man could imagine thousands of ambitious aspirers around the world uttering those words.

What always resided in his mind was the idea that change dominates every ambitious corner of today's world in the race of mankind towards desirable enjoyments and perfection. To some, the struggle for power and control combined with the pursuit of knowledge may constitute the ideal goal as well as a luxury enjoyed with no victims. But, a dark side of such an attempt reveals itself to those who perceive a higher, worthier purpose. Economic, political and social interests tempt the contemporary mind. The man could not help wondering how Frankenstein's words, "It was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn" (37), could be so prominent today.

Warnings about the excessive dominance of self-centeredness come from several quarters. Scientists, political leaders, economists, and other glory-seeking individuals often project this kind of selfish attitude in their attempt to stand out and achieve personal success on the basis of ground-breaking but, nevertheless, ambiguous discoveries in the field of science and technology. The result has been man's distance from nature and the rest of the community: ". . . The same feelings which made me neglect the scenes around me caused me also to forget those friends who were so miles absent, and whom I had not seen for so long a time" (53-54). How this isolation has affected us all as well! Many times, unfortunately, we do not take into

consideration neither nature nor our fellow beings. Nowadays, we tend to pursue selfish tasks and seek to take hasty steps in the ladder of glory and achievement, forgetting that we are primarily social beings. While leafing through the book, Victor Frankenstein's deeds brought to the man's mind a country that has been led to the verge of destruction by corrupted individuals who sacrifice morality for the satisfaction of their own prosperity. William Wordsworth's words echoed through his mind: "The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: / Little we see in nature that is ours" (ll. 1-3). They could not have been more relevant to what he felt that particular moment. They expressed the despair that he now experienced, for a place where hope's light has withered, and it depended on each and every one of them to rekindle it again and restore what was about to be irreparably lost.

There are many instances when the individual takes priority over the whole, and the value of society and humanism is sacrificed on the altar of profit. Consequently, as in the Frankenstein myth, a monster is born, fed on the irresponsibility and the greed of those around it. The man, especially at this point, proceeded with the book with ardent curiosity: "the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs" (56). The ugliness of the creature scared the man who nevertheless repeated the description of the monster's appearance over and over again inside his head:

His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips ... (56)

He could not help thinking of the monster as an image of Victor's atrocious acts. This realization made him consider the immoral acts of humanity itself. As he continued reading, more and more the monster's story echoed the crises we face today. He was particularly touched by the monster's desire to help the cottagers near the hovel that served as the place of its habitation for several days. With wonder and admiration the man read out the following words: "I discovered also another means through which I was enabled to assist their labours. I found that the youth spent a great part of each day in collecting wood for the family fire; and, during the night, I often took his tools the use of which I quickly discovered, and brought home firing sufficient for the consumption of several days" (108). Unperceived by the cottagers, the monster exhibited one of the most generous and unselfish favors that a person can bestow upon his fellow creatures.

As the narrative evolved, however, the man followed the monster's gradual transformation into an evil being: "For the first time the feelings of revenge and hatred filled my bosom, and I did not strive to control them; but, allowing myself to be borne away by the stream, I bent my mind towards injury and death" (134). As he went on with his reading, the man was astonished by the degree of cruelty towards Victor's creation. "It is sad how the lack of sympathy and care can degrade someone to such a wretched being," he thought. Throughout the course of his reading, he came

to new realizations; he could not understand how so many people nowadays, either because of having been the victims of society's injustices or because of their inevitable isolation, tend to project vicious behavior, full of hatred and vengeance.

Closing the book, the man came to his conclusion: the world lacks the sympathy that is needed in order for people to live happily. If they cared for their fellow beings and the welfare of their community, then peace and justice would be restored. Unfortunately, humanity refuses to open its eyes to the true source of destruction. This is due to the duality of human nature. A reconstruction can only begin from the human character itself and gradually take effect on the outside world as well.

The man left the attic, and, as he entered the living room, the lines he had read in the book continued to exercise a powerful influence upon his mind: "we are unfashioned creatures, but half-made up, if one wiser, better, dearer than ourselves – such a friend ought to be – do not lend his aid to perfectionate our weak and faulty natures" (27-28)... When he saw his wife sitting on the sofa, he rushed upon her and took her in his arms. He then showed her the book and advised her to read it. A month later, they decided to sell their luxurious flat in Athens and donate the money. They currently live in a country-house located near Giannina, the house where the man had spent his childhood, the happiest years of his life. When the man's daughter grows up, the book will pass to her own hands, this time with a new inscription added by her father: "In the hope that your heart will forever remain the heart of a child... From your father to you, my dear sweetheart"...

Many years had passed before I finally read the book. The inscription my father wrote on the first page lies there as a reminder of the change within him, and the wish for the same change to come about his own child. From the moment I finished reading it, I was sure of the strength within us all. We have potential for change that we do not know we are capable of, and the only thing needed is to see through, to use our capacity for change positively and against the negative flow of change that our current course points to. Open the book. Open your eyes. Everything will be ok now, and we are all going to be together again. I am certain that every time that I travel through the pages of the book, these words will always create the most illuminating echo:

*"... return to us. You will find a happy, cheerful home,
and friends who love you dearly." (62)*

Works Cited

- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus*. 1831. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1992. Print.
- Wordsworth, William. "The world is too much with us." *Romanticism: An Anthology*. Ed. Duncan Wu. 4th ed. Oxford: Wiley & Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012. 545-46. Print.