

Name

Professor

Course Title

Date

Victor Frankenstein as a Tragic Hero Rather Than a Mad Scientist

When Mary Shelley was publishing her novel, *Frankenstein*, she probably did not imagine how it could be one of the best horror stories of all time. Further, she most likely did not envision that she was creating one of the most controversial characters of literature, Victor Frankenstein. The novel examines the pursuit of knowledge, shining a spotlight on the moral, religious and ethical implications of science (Baker 2). The story of Victor serves to highlight the possible dangers of science without morality and thirst for knowledge. Indeed, Shelley exemplifies a catastrophic effect of the desire to possess the secrets of the universe. However, the question whether Victor is a tragic hero is highly debatable. This essay is based on the thesis that Victor Frankenstein is more of a tragic hero than a mad scientist.

By definition, according to Aristotle's poetics, a tragic hero is a high born individual in a position of power or from a royal family (Schulenburg 1). In his narration to Captain Walton, Victor states that he was from an ideal childhood with his father being a judge and living in the rural environs of Geneva. This implies that Victor is from a family of sensibility and was brought up with love and encouragement particularly in his pursuit of education. Furthermore, Aristotle stipulates that a tragic hero possesses admirable qualities that, in the end, lead to their destruction. Victor has several admirable qualities: he loves his family, admires his sister (adopted) and values his friendship with Henry Clerval. In addition, he demonstrates his attraction towards science and the research of 'alchemists' scholars such as Albertus Magnus and

Cornelius Agrippa (Schulenburg 1). On the other hand, his father claims that theories and studies of these scholars are outmoded, but Victor ignores these claims and instead prefers another teacher who is tolerant towards these scholars. Although Victor's attraction towards alchemists cannot be said to be a flaw or an error, it clearly shows how he is drawn towards studies that exceed the tolerable limits of discipline.

Another argument in support of Victor as a tragic hero is the fact that he has incredible talent and limitless potential. In his first years at Ingolstadt University, he blossoms into a gifted scientist even though, initially, he had devoted himself to the study of ancient philosophers. This makes him even more remarkable. It is worth noting that in the 18th century, scientists devoted their lives towards scientific methods, that is, empirically and objectively observing the workings of the natural world. When he succeeds in creating life, he demonstrates his virtually limitless potential. This is one of the attributes that makes him a tragic hero, that is, he goes beyond the realm of ordinary people.

Another possible argument for Victor Frankenstein as a tragic hero is that he has the right motivations more than often. Not only does he possess an infinite potential and an incredible mind, but also has good intentions most of the times. He is ambitious and passionate about his studies and he is thrilled by the thought of creating life. Before joining university, he had lost his mother to scarlet fever and hence it would be safe to say that he had experienced the frustrations of the earth. He was aware of the grief and emptiness that never heals. His mother's death made him feel that it would be of greater good if science was able to find a solution to one of the biggest human tragedies, mortality.

According to Victor, science should always work towards the benefit of humanity and particularly, to spare human beings the inevitability of loss. Here, Victor demonstrates the

characteristics of a tragic hero in that he is guided by good intentions. However, this does not imply that his intentions are wholly pure because he is also human. Indeed, human weaknesses will also be in the way of his ambitions and pride. Despite these flaws, the tragic hero, Victor, seeks to do what is right, serve others as well as himself. Even though he does not do well all the times, a tragic hero always means well. He notes, “It was a strong effort of the spirit of good; but it was ineffectual. Destiny was too potent, and her immutable laws had decreed my utter destruction” (Shelley 23).

In the analysis of Victor as a tragic hero, one needs to consider both his character and the intentions of the author, Mary Shelley. Clearly, Victor meets a tragic end because of a character flaw. He dies in the pursuit of the monster that he created in an attempt to manipulate nature by seeking to do something that humankind was not meant to do, create life. Once he succeeds in creating life, another character flaw becomes evident. The monster is not essentially evil because it shows kindness to others and all it seeks is to find companionship. Shelley explains that the monster used to provide the De Lacey family with firewood and they considered him as “a good spirit, wonderful” (102). Unfortunately, it cannot find acceptance even from Victor himself because of its physical appearance. The monster did not make a choice to be physically deformed as he was created that way. If Victor had engaged in an appropriate relationship with the monster, his experiment could have been considered a success. Here, he fails as he is unable to overcome his repulsion to the physical appearance of the monster.

After facing rejection by humankind because of its appearance, the creation turns into a murderer. Indeed, Victor’s tragic weakness is his inability to love his own creation because it was ugly and huge, but a devoted and kind friend. Had he been able to overcome this weakness, his wife and brother would not have been murdered, and he would not have died himself. The

creature vows revenge and promises among other things "...be with you on your wedding night" (Shelley 116). This weakness leads to his destruction. In the traditional sense, a tragic hero is an individual who begins at a higher level of society but ends up falling because of a flaw in his character.

Victor Frankenstein is more of a tragic hero than a mad scientist. In correlation to Victor's obsession in science, he can be said to be mad because he is completely unrestrained by judgment and reason. His obsession makes him to ignore family, friends and his own health. He can also be said to be a mad scientist because he is carried away with desire or enthusiasm to create life which ends up outweighing other things that are of importance. Furthermore, Victor can also be said to be a mad scientist because he is often marked by intense or chaotic activity. He is very excited by his progress to an extent that he falls ill. At times, he acts without thinking through like when he tears the monster's mate and throws it into the lake. However, I believe that he is a tragic hero because he has good intentions, starts at a high point in society (creating life) and his major flaw (inability to love his creature) leads to his downfall.

Works Cited

Baker, Anaya M. "The Role of Science in Frankenstein by Mary Shelley." *LetterPile*. N.p., 2016.

Web. 13 Jan. 2018.

Schulenburg, Marjorie. "Full Text of "Victor Frankenstein as Tragic Hero"." *Archive.org*. Web.

13 Jan. 2018.

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein, Or, the Modern Prometheus*. Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2008. Print.