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The Persistence of Narrative:

Archetypal and Thematic Parallelism in Milton and Shelley

T. S. Eliot famously pointed out that no work of art can stand on its own, but must rather be examined within its artistic context before true meaning can be apprehended. One of history's more well-known pairings of the literary art can be found in the relationship between John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. This research project grew out of a simple source study between the two books, but took on greater shape as the enormous implications of the thematic relationships between the works became more and more evident. In the next few minutes, I'd like to show you exactly how an examination of the thematic and archetypal parallels between *Paradise Lost* and *Frankenstein* can give rise to questions of universal import across the literary and philosophical spectrum. We'll be doing this by first examining *Frankenstein*'s genesis and the shadows cast across that event by its Miltonic predecessor, and then the actual parallels between the two, before posing some of the questions which this literary relationship opens to us.

The story of how Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley came up with the concept for her most well-known work is no secret. She, her husband Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and another friend were adventuring in Switzerland near Lake Geneva, and, driven indoors by rain, they decided to have a contest to see who could write the best ghost story. After a few days of hard thinking, Mary records that the first image came at her almost in a dream--an image of a scientist constructing life. She wrote in her diary: "When I placed my head upon my pillow I did not

sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision,—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together—I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world.” It may not seem self-evident that *Frankenstein* and *Paradise Lost* are intertwined, but the epigraph on the title page of Shelley’s book adjusts that misconception. It is taken directly from Book 10 of Milton’s epic: “Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me man? Did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?” Recall as well that according to the diaries and letters of the Shelley family, both Mary and Percy had been reading *Paradise Lost* with a curious regularity. There is no doubt that Mary’s conception of Frankenstein, from first dream to moment of publishing, was enormously affected by her recent readings of Milton.

At this point let’s begin examining the thematic and archetypal parallels themselves. The primary roles that the characters in *Frankenstein* assume are those of Adam and Satan, and, while other parallels can and have been made, such as between Victor and God, and between Walton and the outcast demons, the scope of this project currently precludes investigation beyond the aforementioned two, which are both deepest and most important.

The first way in which the themes intersect is through Shelley’s use of the Adamic archetype. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton’s Adam is a son of God, created innocent and yet vulnerable to his own naiveté. Victor and the creature both share these traits, for while man is born in sin, it often takes time for the full depravity of his nature to fully express itself in deed and thought.

Victor assumes the characteristics of the Adamic role through his naïve nature, and his ultimate fall. At the beginning of *Frankenstein*, he is a guileless student, ardently seeking the knowledge of the universe. Just as Adam's sin was in pursuit of the knowledge of good and evil, Victor's fall also results from an attempt to apprehend power belonging to God only. While the delineating mark remains invisible to the undiscerning heart, both stories make it clear that there is a point beyond which man cannot exercise his dominion. One cannot help but note that our first parents and Victor are all entertaining or being tempted by explicit notions of becoming like gods when their falls occur. Continuing in the same vein, both Adam and Victor must bear the consequences of their transgressions. Adam's violation of God's command causes the world to be cursed, and he himself must return to the dust from whence he came. Similarly, Victor, after an attempt to flee in horror from his misdeeds, is literally brought face to face with the results of his actions.

Frankenstein's monster takes on Adam's persona from a different perspective, namely that of the newborn creation. Just as Adam is formed from the dust of the ground, so too the creature: Victor collects the pieces for his experiments from "charnel houses". Wittingly or no, Victor's experiments are an attempt at reversing the original creation sequence: while God takes dust and forms a man from it, Victor takes for his raw materials what was once men and is returning to dust. Despite their varying methods of formation, both Adam and the creature are born in complete innocence. Adam and his wife have no knowledge of good or evil, or the shame that accompanies such knowledge, until they eat from the forbidden tree. The creature, while having no forbidden fruit to learn from, is still without conscience or shame at its moment of creation. He clothes himself out of a need for warmth rather than a need for privacy, and it is not until he studies the books belonging to the De Lacy family that he learns of evil. Both Adam

and the creature lose their original state through the natures they were given at birth: Adam falls through his innocence; the creature through the repulsiveness of his physical self.

The second main archetype into and out of which Victor and the creature leap is the Satanic. In their pride, hatred, and rebellion, both of Shelley's characters bear marked resemblance to Milton's fallen angel, who some have considered to be the true protagonist of the poem. Percy Shelley himself viewed Satan as on a higher moral plane than Milton's God. Regardless of the moral validity of rebellion, clearly Milton's lines "So will fall / He and his faithless progeny" apply just as fittingly to Victor and his creature as they do to Satan and his diabolical minions.

The ultimate cause of Satan's fall "like lightning" was not his assault on God, but rather the pride which caused him to do so. Hubris was the stumbling block over which Satan tripped, and Victor Frankenstein is not immune to its lure either. Frankenstein's pride first enters into the narrative when discussing how his passion for the natural sciences stemmed from a desire for power and grandeur rather than knowledge. Despite being counseled by his teachers to forsake his "chimeras of boundless grandeur", the young scientist pressed on. Just as Satan launched an actual war against Heaven, Frankenstein commits crimes against both God and men in an attempt to become a god himself. Similarly, both Satan and Victor must suffer the terrible consequences of their pride. Satan is cursed to overthrow and everlasting defeat after his war against God and subsequent deception of man, while Victor's suffering chases him to the grave.

The creature takes on a slightly different facet of the Satanic persona. Curiously, unlike Victor, he does so consciously: after reading *Paradise Lost* at the De Lacy home, he begins to identify himself as a Satanic figure, saying as much to Frankenstein at their meeting:

"Remember, that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel,

whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed”. Both Satan and the monster are creatures; both see themselves as being at eternal enmity with their creator. The creature rationalizes its misdeeds by viewing itself as the victim of Victor’s abandonment, while at that same time embracing his rebellion. In fact, the creature goes so far as to say that he endures suffering even greater than that of Lucifer. He, like Satan, chooses defiance rather than submission, recalcitrance rather than repentance, and destruction rather than redemption. In a twist reminiscent of Aristotle’s maxim that all things seek their true and natural place, the demons in their hearts drive both characters to spiritual and literal self-immolation.

All of these similarities and crossovers are no doubt interesting, but simply exploring the parallels themselves remains unsatisfying. What else can be learned from the way that Shelley borrowed wholesale from Milton? The first and most obvious answer is to attempt tracing the themes beyond *Paradise Lost*. Eliot defined the creative act as a collecting and systematizing of stimuli, emotions, and thoughts to form a new and cohesive whole. What this means is that the fundamental “particles” of which any art is made are hypothetically traceable through contextual analysis, having merely been shaped into new combinations rather than created *ex nihilo* by the artist. Unfortunately, little exploration is necessary beyond *Paradise Lost*, being as it is a self-affirmed reshaping of the *Genesis* narrative. Not until we start thinking forward in time do things get interesting. The artistic particles shared by *Paradise Lost* and *Frankenstein* did not stop moving in 1818; rather, they remain active into our own time, and alive enough to be used in varying mediums. A prime example of this is Ridley Scott’s film *Blade Runner*, in which the idea of creature striving against malicious—or at least ignorant—creator is a key thread. At this point the realization is made that these particular thematic structures exist in a continuum stretching all the way from the book of *Genesis* down to 1980s sci-fi cult classics. Now that we

can see the way these themes of creation and rebellion have retained their strength across time and culture for millennia, we arrive at the true question—from whence do they come? What is it in the human psyche that finds them meaningful enough to keep revisiting and reworking them? Possible answers are given and merely raise more questions. If these themes are simply facets of the eternal human struggle to impose meaning on chaos, why invent a creator? It seems that something inside us feels the necessity of a greater being or law to provide an order that can either be acknowledged or rejected. It is enormously significant that relativism, the ultimate form of self-governance, does not appear innate. We are born with conscience, not freedom.

From whence these themes, these ideas? They have no true referent in ordinary human life and interaction. Could it be that some sort of historical or archetypal truth is being communicated through our collective creative acts? The idea is not as ludicrous as may appear. Western thought has for millennia been comfortable with the concept of truth bleeding into reality via invisible processes. Some key examples of this are the idea of the conscience, a ‘black box’ which serves as the point of intersection between physical mind and metaphysical morality, and, more recently, Jung’s theory of the personality’s inferior function serving as a direct yet invisible link to the subconscious.

Unfortunately, I have no solid conclusions to present at this time. The enormity of the questions posed require equally monumental efforts to formulate functional and testable hypotheses, including, perhaps, a new theory of the collective subconscious rooted in historical or archetypal fact. However, the fact that these questions could radically reshape the way we think of literary themes and building blocks is quite evident. Contained in a girl’s 1816 dream by Lake Geneva may be answers to parts of the great mystery—human nature and the *imago dei*.

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