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The Perils of Reckless Discovery

Attempting to create a “new species,” Victor Frankenstein violates societal norms and the limits of human nature, poisoning the notion of western purity and disrupting his domestic affections (Shelley 42). His obsession with reckless discovery has consequences which parallel British imperialism’s irresponsible exploration and its lasting repercussions. In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Victor’s scientific exploration functions as a metaphor for British imperialist exploration, uncovering the adverse effects of reckless discovery adulterating western purity and domestic affections.

Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* during the Georgian Era, a period when British society had stringent societal norms defining the limitations of gender roles, outsider influence, religious attitudes, and science. Particularly, the upper class religiously abided by these unspoken norms to maintain a pristine and uniform image. For example, upper-class women had the sole duty of bearing children and raising them; everything else—including education and social life—was secondary. However, with the rise of industrialization came the emergence of the middle class, which sought to emulate the social customs of the upper class (Vaijayanti). As a result of social assimilation, much of Georgian society shared values of propriety, censorship, and British superiority thus coining the term “western purity” (Abbasi and Alireza). The ideas of western purity coincide with those of domestic affection, the familial relationships that establish the

fundamentals of society. In addition, new contradictions between science and religion engendered fear into society (Mathes), catalyzing the condemnation of science and reinforcing western purity. Consequently, scientific discovery was mainly limited to astronomy (Allen) or used as a form of entertainment for the upper class (Mathes).

Some argue that the British Regime's aggressive stance on imperialism ultimately tainted western purity and British domestic affections. The loss of the American colonies heightened British imperialist efforts; the regime sent more voyages than ever before to discover new lands and raw materials ("An Introduction..."). However, Michelle Levy argues that these enthralling quests into the unknown threatened western purity and domestic affections. The thrill of imperialist discovery enticed countless men away from their domestic duties and instead become colonial explorers. While these men sought new lands, their British cultures mixed with foreign influences to develop hybrid identities. As the men returned from colonial quests, their hybrid identities—impure with foreign influence—would adulterate the tranquility of western purity. To make matters worse, most men would perish from disease or become lost at sea. As children lost their fathers, wives lost their husbands, and mothers lost their sons, these reckless discoveries severely impacted British domestic affections. While the British Regime continued to support imperialism for economic gain, they neglected its adverse effects on western purity and the erosion of British domestic affections (Levy).

Paralleling British imperialist exploration, Victor's scientific exploration with life engenders a hybrid identity, as he blurs the societal definition of human nature and adulterates western purity in the process. Victor's extreme devotion to his scientific endeavor to create life from the lifeless completely entralls him. Speaking of his excitement, Victor raves about

creating a new being: “A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me” (Shelley 42). The religious diction used to describe Victor’s “new species,” which would name him as its “creator,” shatters the societal distinction between human and divine nature. This violation of cultural norms elicits Victor’s hybrid identity of man and God, poisoning the concept of western purity in the process. Again, Victor progresses this motif of hybrid identities as he blurs the boundaries between man and woman. Describing his laborious efforts to create life, Victor mentions how “Winter, spring, and summer, passed away during [his] labours” (Shelley 44). The summation of time in winter, spring, and summer totals nine months—the same duration of pregnancy. Additionally, the diction choice of “labours” has strong connotations relating to childbirth, suggesting that Victor has birthed his own creation. Through this manner, Victor invalidates the societal truth that both man and woman are needed to conceive life, while also nullifying God’s role in creation. Victor displays his hybrid identity by absorbing the characteristics of motherhood, violating the cultural norms of Georgian women, thus poisoning western purity. Furthermore, Victor’s science experiment of birthing life to a grotesque creature—in a society that denounces science—highlights the extent to which he violates western purity. Victor’s reckless discovery poisoning western purity parallels British imperialism’s imprudent exploration causing an adulteration of western purity.

While obsessed with his creature’s gestation, Victor completely loses familial ties, illustrating the extent of damage that reckless discovery causes on domestic affections. Victor finally achieves a result from his obsession to discover a new species when the creature comes to life. Frightened and overwhelmed, Victor tries to sleep. Nevertheless, he is only further terrified

by a dream featuring “Elizabeth in the bloom of health” transition into “the corpse of [his] dead mother in [his] arms” (Shelley 46). The adverse effects of Victor’s experiment catalyze a disruption of the domestic affections of his relationships with his mother and Elizabeth, two prominent female figures in his life. Additionally, the image of a lively “bloom” shifts to one of “grave-worms,” highlighting the extreme life to death effects that Victor’s reckless discovery holds on his domestic affections (Shelley 46). In contiguity, Clerval’s encounter with Victor accentuates the extent to which Victor’s domestic affections have been impacted. After seeing a flustered Victor, Clerval orders Victor to restore order in his life by writing to his father and cousin who are “uneasy at [his] long silence” (Shelley 51). The pursuit of Victor’s reckless discovery distracts him from keeping domestic relationships with his father and cousin, prominent male figures in his life. Further, Clerval even mentions that Victor’s cousin wrote to him, but Victor fails to even notice the gesture (Shelley 51). Victor’s scientific discovery not only distracts him from relationships, but it commandeers his life to disregard any domestic affections. Pairing the two aforementioned examples exemplifies how Victor’s scientific discovery has in turn completely eroded his domestic affections, cutting ties with both the men and women in his life. Victor’s disruption of domestic affections from reckless discovery functions as a metaphor for British society’s breach of domestic affections resultant of imperialist expedition. The adverse effects of unregulated exploration—whether scientific or colonial—on domestic affections only surface once the relationships have already been impacted.

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