Elena Vaughn
ENL204, British Literature II, M. Larson
Final Paper-The Rime of Frankenstein: Ice, Frames, and Consequences
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The Rime of Frankenstein: Ice, Frames, and Consequences

Two of the most influential authors of the Romantic period are Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Mary Shelley. Coleridge is known for epic poems such as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) and Mary Shelley first published her groundbreaking novel *Frankenstein* (1818) at just 21 years old. Both stories explore the consequences of pushing the limits of discovery and allowing science to become paramount over familial affection.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is a fantastical tale of the sea voyage that changed the titular sailor forever. He recalls shooting an innocent albatross and his punishment of watching his entire crew die and be reanimated as mute zombies. He spends a while in this agony, receiving some visits from supernatural beings who decide his fate. These supernatural beings eventually decide he is allowed to return home, but his continued penance is to warn others of the dangers of exploring too far.

Frankenstein tells the story of the eponymous doctor, scientist, madman, and genius as he assembles and a human from various corpses and reanimate it. He fails to see his creation as a human being and therefore fails to educate the Creature on how to be a civilized member of society. As a result the Creature (also known as Peter according to me) feels lost and abandoned in the world. This unfortunately leads him to murder those close to Frankenstein, such as his little brother William, best friend Henry Clerval, and his cousin-bride Elizabeth. The novel ends with Frankenstein and Peter meeting in the Arctic after a wild goose chase.They meet on the ship of Captain Walton, who serves as a captive audience to the cat and mouse game. Victor Frankenstein dies of illness and Peter leaves on his way to commit suicide.

One of the key elements to framing a story is the location. Both Frankenstein and Rime are set in cold Arctic Ocean, also known as a polar space. According to Katherine Bowers, “Imagined polar space in nineteenth-century fiction is predicated on extreme, terrifying, treacherous, and yet awe-inspiring conditions; the polar is therefore a natural setting for the Gothic…” (Bowers 2). The ice blurs the line between sea and land, and it’s so large and hostile that it seems outside of “the civilized mind.” This is an apt description as both Frankenstein and the Mariner are beyond human rationality when they reach the Arctic. Using polar setting is “a way of writing about the extreme and uncanny space at the end of the world.¨ It allows for self awareness to face subconscious anxieties (Bowers 2). In the 1800s, British authors used polar space and self awareness to expose “the fallacy of ideals such as heroism, civilisation, and progress.” Instead of a hostile person or tribe to combat, the protagonist is forced to wrestle with “an exaggerated reflection of his repressed, ‘uncivilised’ self” (Bowers 3). While Peter is a separate being from Frankenstein, he serves as a “shadow self,” a foil. As Joyce Carol Oates aptly describes it “as Frankenstein and his despised shadow-self engage in one after another of the novel's many dialogues...Frankenstein "is" a demonic parody (or extension) of Milton's God...he is totally unable to control the behavior of his demon... necessarily lacking a name” (Oates 545). The fight in *Rime*, however, is primarily internal, as the sailor must come to terms with his actions and make amends.

Bowers explains the function of placing protagonists alone amidst the ice: “Polar Gothic allows for...the potential for a new definition of self, both for the individual and for the state he represents” (Bowers 6). Bowers expands on this in regards to the bond between Victor and Peter: “Because in one sense the demon is Frankenstein's deepest self, the relationship between them is dreamlike, fraught with undefined emotion” (Oates 551). Both of these statements show how each protagonist is shaped by their polar surroundings and their interactions. Bowers sums up how changing perceptions of ice show character growth in *Frankenstein*:

> "In *Frankenstein*, ice serves metaphorically for the limits of civilisation, empire, and science...ice, like death, can be overcome through the sheer power of will. The scientist projects his own hubris onto the explorer in this speech and the expedition is doomed" (Bowers 7-8).

In addition to similar locations, the stories are both framed as an oral explication, relying on a mostly mute listener to absorb the tale and react to it. Shelley uses Captain Walton as a parallel of the wedding-guest, spellbound by Victor's terrible tale. Throughout the novel, Victor will abruptly make a comment directly to Captain Walton as the Mariner will address the wedding guest in *Rime*.

One example is found in chapter 3 of *Frankenstein*. As Victor describes his fascination with alchemy and other sciences, he pauses to pique Captain Walton's interest: "I see by your eagerness...that you expect to be informed of the secret with which I am acquainted; that cannot be: listen patiently until the end of my story, and you will easily perceive why I am reserved upon that subject." (Shelley 56). In addition, in chapter 4, Victor goes on a bit of a moral tangent, defending his decision to awaken Peter. At the end of his rant he abruptly realizes he is "moralizing the most important part of the story and your looks remind me to proceed" (Shelley 58-59). One wonders whether Victor pauses to intrigue Walton or to steady his own nerves.

Similarly in *Rime*, the wedding guest will occasionally interject, offering reactions of fear or awe The first interruption occurs when the Mariner describes the first death of his crew. As he describes their souls' ascent, the wedding guest exclaims:

> "I fear thee, ancient Mariner!/ I fear thy skinny hand! /And thou art long, and lank, and brown, /As is the ribbed sea-sand. /I fear thee and thy glittering eye, /And thy skinny hand, so brown.'— /Fear not, fear not, thou Wedding-Guest! /This body dropt not down." (224-231)

This quick dismissal of the guest's fear and dread shows the Mariner's lack of concern for his listeners as well as disregarding the impact of the story. The second interruption, with the same opening line, occurs when the Mariner describes the rise of the ghost crew and the Wedding Guest expresses just concern about the Mariner's humanity.

> "'I fear thee, ancient Mariner!' /Be calm, thou Wedding-Guest! /'Twas not those souls that fled in pain, /Which to their corses came again, /But a troop of spirits blest" (345-349).

Here the Mariner reassures the guest that he is in fact human, but again brushes over the man's concern and dread. The Mariner's repeated self-absorption mirrors Victor's, and both receive their due consequences for such behavior.

In addition to parallel framing structures, there are quite a few allusions to Coleridge throughout Frankenstein. These allusions can take the form of direct quotes or indirect references and homages. The first and only direct quote is found in chapter 5, when Frankenstein quotes lines 446-451 of Rime as Peter runs away (Shelley 61).

> ""Like one, that on a lonesome road/Doth walk in fear and dread,/And having once turned round walks on,/And turns no more his head;/Because he knows, a frightful fiend/ Doth close behind him tread".

The Mariner murmurs these lines as he slowly drifts closer toward his native land, filled with cautious hope. As a contrast, Victor quotes the passage as he wanders the streets the morning after Perer's awakening. His creature has vanished and he dreads returning to the crime scene of his own home. (Shelley 60-61). These two contexts of the same words serve as a contrast to each other-one in cautious hope and the other in regret, disappointment and utter despair. This contrast enhances Shelley's critique of Victor's actions and the general danger of pushing exploration too far.

The first indirect allusion to *Rime* occurs when Captain Walton writes to his sister that he is "going to unexplored regions, to 'the land of mist and snow'; but I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety, or if I should come back to you as worn and woeful as the "Ancient Mariner." (Shelley 32). This shows that Walton is initially excited and optimistic about the journey, perhaps to a naive or foolhardy degree. This overeager excitement was a common Romantic sentiment, but Shelley critiques it by having Walton change his mind after hearing the whole story. (Bowers 6-7). This echoes the sentiments of the Mariner and his crew in the beginning of the tale. The Mariner describes how"[t]he ship was cheered, the harbour cleared, Merrily did we drop" (Coleridge 21-22). Both characters show initial excitement as well as hubris. This combination will eventually lead to pain and destruction for them and everyone around them.

This idea of hubris bringing about pain is a central theme in both texts and culminates in one "major action" in each. The central moment of *Frankenstein* is when Victor succeeds at his fantastical endeavor and Peter is brought to life. Both Peter and the doctor feel "chilled" at the moment of awakening. "This chill, however, is not the wind of promise...but the icy hand of fate, binding creator and creation together" (Bowers 8). Dr. Frankenstein is abruptly disgusted by what he has done, and he abandons his progeny. The central moment of *Rime* is the Mariner's shooting of the Albatross. The Mariner also believes he has done "a hellish thing" (Coleridge 91) and his crew mates initially agree, but quickly support his choice.

> " Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay,/That made the breeze to blow!/Nor dim nor red, like God's own head,/The glorious Sun uprist:/Then all averred, I had killed the bird/That brought the fog and mist./'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay,/That bring the fog and mist." (Coleridge 95-102).

This quick reversal of the crew´s opinions plays a part in the consequences they recieve. The Mariner deserves the majority of the consequences for his direct action, but the complicity of the crewmen partly justifies their consequences as well.

Bowers eloquently describes both Victor and the Mariner's motivations for sharing their stories: "the ghosts that emerge from the ice represent not only the spirit of the place, and the anxiety of failure, but also a mirroring of the self, a potentiality for a future failure embedded in the past and kept alive through memory" (Bowers 17). Both explorers attempt to prevent their mistakes from being repeated by others, but don't hold much hope of success. While both Coleridge and Shelley liked stories about the unknown they both opposed real world exploration (Levy 694). Coleridge used the mariner's attack on the innocent bird as a caution of the consequences of isolation from "domestic affection" (Levy 696). Domestic affection simply means love of home.

Coleridge shows that attempting to push the limits of discovery can lead to total family detachment. This is best exemplified by his interactions with his undead nephew-lines 341-344 (Levy 696). In these lines, found in part 5, the Mariner rows with his undead nephew, but they don't speak to each other. In addition, the Mariner's insistence on secluding the wedding guest and the lasting effects of the story show his lack of ability to socially relate (Levy 696-697). The Mariner simply walks away, leaving the wedding guest to process this heavy information on his own. (Coleridge 618-625)

According to Michelle Levy, Captain Walton's exploration at the start of Frankenstein picks up where Coleridge's Mariner left off (Levy 698). "Walton's willingness to imagine his sister's sufferings and to let it influence his actions is what ultimately separates him from Frankenstein". Frankenstein ígnores all warnings and doesn't believe in surrender or retreat (Levy 699). The most prominent example of Frankenstein's foolhardy ignorance is the central problem of the novel, his defiance of natural law and creation of this new being. In ignoring all human warnings and common sense, Frankenstein becomes

“the first of a new generation of scientific discoverers who refuses to acknowledge any ethical restraints”. Victor’s ego is strong that he presumes he can override biology an create a new superior race. (Levy 700). “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.“ (Shelley 57). Through Victor’s lack of guidance or reproach, Shelley shows the benefits of domestic affection by “negative example” (Levy 700).

All three characters ‘articulate the close ties between textual and actual discovery”, telling their tales enough to turn them into written works (Levy 704). “Not wishing to censor their own imaginations, [Shelley and Coleridge] offer models of compassionate readers in the wedding guest, the creature, and Robert Walton, who emerge sadder and wiser for the tales they heard” (Levy 708).

Although Victor refuses to accept, teach, or love his offspring, Peter develops a heart independently that far surpasses that of his maker: “Surely one of the secrets of Frankenstein, which helps to account for its abiding appeal, is the demon's patient, unquestioning, utterly faithful, and utterly human love for his irresponsible creator.” (Oates 545) This is most evident when Peter initially confronts Victor and begs to be understood. He asks Victor“How can I move thee? Will no entreaties cause thee to turn a favourable eye upon thy creature, who implores thy goodness and compassion? Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity: but am i not alone, miserably alone?” (Shelley 93). Later in the novel Peter actúally *helps* Frankenstein stay alive on their wild goose chase, offering food and clues to the path. Of course Victor is unaware who aids him and believes it is “the spirits I had invoked to aid me” (Shelley 173-174) . Throughout the novel, Peter becomes more human/empathetic while Frankenstein slowly loses all humanity, missing his own lesson so blatantly and tragically (Oates 545-546).

In conclusion, both *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Frankenstein* use framing devices and allusions to show the dangers of defying natural law and exceeding common sense. These framing devices primarily include physical location and story structure. For the murder of an innocent bird the Mariner is sentenced to psychological and physical torture. For failing to fully accept, love, and teach Peter, his creator Victor brings destruction on himself and those around him. The unforgiving landscape of the Arctic serves as a parallel to an unforgiving world that will not tolerate broken boundaries. For those who do dare cross a line, there will always be consequences.

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