



The Light of Frankenstein

“What may not be expected in a country of eternal light?” This is what a character muses on the very first page of this novel. The word “light” has a strong theming in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. This word has different connotations and different meanings – it can be defined as physical brightness, such as the light of sun (OED, s.v. “light,” n. 1a), or as the absence of weight (adj. 1a), or as a joyful (OED, s.v. “light-hearted”, 1a) emotion. In certain times, such as the times when this book was written and published, the word “light” could also be taken to refer to excellency, intelligence, (OED, s.v. “light,” n. 10a) or even the lungs of the body (OED, s.v. “lights,”). It has been used to denote fear (“to scare the lights out of someone” for example) as well as joy, and this strange dichotomy is befitting in the stitched-together story of Frankenstein.

The word “light” as it refers to the lungs is not directly present in the novel. However, as it would have been known by both Marry Shelley and her readers at the time, it may have purposefully been used to evoke the idea of the organs, especially during the scene in which the creature describes its first moments of life. “That oppressive light” (Shelley 83) that he describes as entering into him is easily interpreted as air filling the lungs, as well as the more metaphorical “spark of being” (Shelley 41) that brings the creature to life. This is the first instance of the creature using this descriptor in a negative way, a point which will be expanded on later. The

lung imagery gives a somewhat gruesome sense and is an unsettling reminder that the creature is made from the corpses of others – including the organs keeping it alive. It is, inside and out, a representation of Victor's overzealous thirst for knowledge and excellency.

"Excellency" itself is an alternative usage of "light" from older English (OED, s.v. "light," n. 10a), which fits in with Victor's usage of it as a younger and more innocently eager child, as well as his time at college leading up to his creation of the creature. Excellency is a haunting force in Victor's life. Even before his mother's passing, even before he entered college, it seemed his driving force was intelligence, and the pursuit of knowledge regardless of others' opinions (Shelley 21). He talks about "the enlightenment era" with a sense of admiration (Shelley 28). Victor's usage of the word light evokes thoughts of science and knowledge, and this is the most common way he uses the word in a positive manner. The creature is a result of this endeavor, and all its concurrent actions by proxy. Victor admires knowledge and the pursuit of it (regardless of consequence) a great deal, and his zealousness continues up until he brings the creature to life. From there, usage of light as a positive descriptor by Victor dwindles by a large amount.

The next time the word is used to denote a positive sense of emotion is by the creature during his time wandering. "It had then filled me with a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul and allowed it to soar from the obscure world to light and joy." (Shelley 77) His first and most common use of this word is "light" as in the lightness of emotion, and he first feels such in response to viewing a glacier for the first time (Shelley 77). While Victor himself does use "light" in positive ways on occasion, it is far less than the amount of time the creature does, even after his negative associations with it upon awakening. Unlike Victor, the creature is much more immediately drawn to nature. In a reading that views the creature as Victor's alternative self, this

sets up the creature immediately as Victor's better half. He is enthused by nature, whereas Victor is more interested in "enlightenment" and knowledge of the unknown and unnatural. The primary usage of light as a negative thing by the creature is when describing its awakening; at this moment it describes the light as oppressive and "pouring in" upon him (Shelley 83). Still, however, it describes light as specifically *gentle* upon seeing the moon. Both characters have experiences of using this word in a positive sense early on in their lives, before almost entirely dropping it later- for the two of them, that catalyst is the creature's visage itself. The multiple uses of the word "light" are reflective of their relationship to themselves and each other, and their decline in emotions following the awakening of the creature.

The creature has the most uses of the word light as emotion or warmth, and after he is created Victor almost never uses the word in this way again. The creature learns to associate "dark" with being "cold and alone," and the light is used to describe warmth, as in the light of the moon and the sun (Shelley 83). It is also associated with the family the creature grows attached to. His eyes "become accustomed to the light", figuratively showing his acclimation to the life around him prior to realizing what he looks like. It is at the point where the creature first awakens and is first learning that he uses the term light to mean positive things. After he realizes himself and returns to Victor, his use of such drops just as Victor's had – in fact, light as a positive emotion is not used again throughout the book in its entirety. It is following this point where both of their situations worsen, and Victor and the creature grow more focused on their disgust for one another.

Negative usages of "light," despite the lack of positives, are still used semi-frequently throughout. The creature tells Victor that he intends to make him "so wretched that the light of day will be hateful" to him (Shelley 141). The creature's childlike nature at the beginning of his

awakening mirrors Victor's own personality prior to creating it, and its personality following its own realization of its existence is – much like Victor's - despondent. This usage of light, as something negative instead of something good, pushes the book's theming of dichotomies. It also acts as a subtle reminder of Victor and the creature's parallels to each other – they have both been at one point in time responsible for the other's happiness or unhappiness. The creature indirectly brought Victor joy during the process of its creation, and Victor likewise allowed the creature to experience things it enjoyed, such as the sun and literature. More so than happiness, the two are directly responsible for the other's misfortunes and dissatisfaction. Victor's creation of the creature and denial of the mate left it in a permanent state of loneliness and isolation, and the creature then chose to hunt down Victor's family in retaliation.

The dichotomy in the language of this book is subtle – but it is also persistent, and a devoted reader may pick up on the way words themselves are used to show the emotions of characters and those emotions' twistedness. "Lightness" here refers to organs or emotion or intelligence – and the spark of light that brought the creature into existence was the one that condemned it and Victor both.

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Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus*. Whittaker,
1823.