

**Between Enlightenment and Self-Destruction:
The Sublime Landscape in *Frankenstein* and *Moby Dick***

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What can we make of the careful landscape descriptions in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*? A desire for tidy interpretations tempts one to do away with them thoroughly, rationalize their exclusion from the set of meaningful aspects in the novel. Perhaps Shelley included them as a simple travelogue of her journeys across Europe, an offering of vicarious mobility to her readers. Some dismiss the passages as superficial literary experiment, Shelley answering husband Percy with something like a prose version of his poem "Mont Blanc." "This section of the novel is a prose version of Percy Shelley's poem 'Mont Blanc,'" explains the Cliff's Notes Study Guide. Lazy high school students everywhere breath a sigh of relief. Would we so callously neglect descriptions of the sea in *Moby Dick*, in which Melville scholars cherish every detail as potentially rich with symbolic importance? And consider the elements common to both novels: fateful sea voyages into the unknown, obsessed madmen, supernatural monsters, lengthy pursuits ending in death and destruction. Major shared influences partially account for these (the Bible, Milton, *Faust*, and, yes, Percy Shelley), but a close comparison reveals subtle distinctions that yield further insight into both novels. How can we understand the relationship between the novels? What can we gain through a symbolic reinterpretation of Mary Shelley's use of the sublime landscape? And can consideration of *Frankenstein* as an influence on *Moby Dick* improve our understanding of that work, and the era of American literature in which Melville wrote?

To generate a comparative analysis of *Frankenstein* and *Moby Dick* would

present some significant problems for one who wished to closely relate the works utilizing references to era, author biography, or literary genre. The first would require an accounting for the 33 years that separate their publication, the second a trans-Atlantic collapsing of space and a rationalization of some gross anatomical disparity, and the third, well, that one's a bit more elusive. Genre as a concept takes as its very function the reconciliation of empirical differences between works by labeling shared themes, settings, styles, or plot elements as "genre conventions." Genre assignment is always an interpretive task, making it a handy technique for wrangling truly disparate texts together, and indeed many past analyses referencing the two works utilized this strategy. But that same flexible quality of genrefication, what makes it such a useful rhetorical tool, also leaves pure genre analyses vulnerable to challenge. In considering these two works, I'm willing to concede a case can be made for *Frankenstein* as a Gothic novel, indeed the critical consensus points to such an interpretation (if we accept multiple encyclopedia entries as roughly approximating a consensus), but what is *Moby Dick*? Can we accurately describe that work as Gothic, or even literary Romance?

Those aforementioned Cliff's Notes summary-reading high school students might not acknowledge a problem, uniting the two within the genre of "those old books they force us to read for school," i.e., "The Great Books." Thus we see the Frankensteinian tragedy of the rampant confusion of axiology and taxonomy gone unchecked. A more complicated, but no less problematic argument for *Moby Dick* as Romance attributes a kind of generic atavism to American literature. This view casts Melville, and contemporaries like Hawthorne, as a generation behind English literature, adherents to literary trends already a few decades old. Though not necessarily popular in current

literary theory (Rogin), this idea of an American Renaissance or American Romanticism derived whole-cloth from European influence seems implicit in much of the scholarship addressing both works. For example, in his otherwise illuminating history of the Gothic novel from 1964, Robert Hume temporally brackets the genre “between 1764 and 1820,” only to later appropriate *Moby Dick* as “perhaps the greatest of Gothic novels, and an almost perfect example of the form.” Never mind the publication of that work in 1851 puts it a good 30 years out of the Gothic canon by Hume's own reckoning. A more recent attempt to incorporate *Moby Dick* and other Post-Revolutionary American works into the Romantic category explicitly references this fallacy, though with qualifications: “This ‘literary narrative,’ I argue, can be understood as an American version of what had been done several generations earlier in England and Germany, and thus is, broadly, ‘romantic.’” (Arac, 43).

The problem of genre happens to be especially acute with *Moby Dick*. The text superficially encourages genrefication; one can find plenty of textual evidence to classify the novel as memoir, literary Romance, epic, Gothic, or any number of others. But this very excess of evidence makes simple categorization difficult. Even by addressing only those segments of the novel concerned with the voyage of the Pequod, the fiery language of Ahab, and the chase of the white whale—those aspects that we might call essentially novelistic—we're already privileging a type of reading inconsistent with the holistic experience of the book, which I would describe as textual eclecticism. Melville self-consciously interrupts the core narrative of the novel with segments like the extracts and etymology, chapters on cetology, theatrical blocks of pure dialogue, aesthetic evaluations of paintings, quantitative comparison of whale carcasses, even a lengthy treatise on

whale cuisine—just try to find traces of the Romantic in Ishmael's recipe for whale brains. No, genre seems a problematic grounds on which to base a comparison of the two novels.

Still more strategies to justify comparison prove unsatisfactory. Much cited is the fact that Melville owned a copy of *Frankenstein* and many works of European Romanticism (Sealts). Certainly, had the contrapositive been true—if we knew for a fact that Melville hadn't read *Frankenstein*—any direct comparison would be strained. Still, how much rhetorical mileage can we really get out of this one? And why even appeal to extra-textual historical research when Melville gives us a kind of bibliography within the novel itself? Shakespeare, Goethe, and Edmund Burke are right there in the “Extracts” section, as are Darwin, Hobbes, and Thomas Jefferson. Our knowing that Melville consulted the former group no more proves *Moby Dick* followed directly the Romantics than the latter group makes it a study of naturalism, a treatise on philosophy, or the Declaration of Independence. I question these strategies to balance my own tendency to overdetermine the relationship between *Frankenstein* and *Moby Dick*. I want to avoid creating a teleology that would explain Melville's work as the natural evolution of Mary Shelley's, or that would make the latter author only understandable as a literary genius “ahead of her time.” Having called out these tendencies, I hope to rebuild a new space for understanding the relationship, to layer close textual analysis, a consideration of their shared literary influences, and an attempt to parse out any direct influence of *Frankenstein* on Melville's novel.

I've already denied (somewhat facetiously) any formal equivalence of Mary Shelley's landscape descriptions and Percy's poetry, but *Frankenstein* certainly invites a

comparison. For the Romantic, the sublime landscape confronted the observer with scenery of such immensity and grandeur to strain comprehension and reason, but would ultimately prove subordinate to human creativity and imagination, and therapeutic for the soul. Mary Shelley explicitly voices this perspective through Victor Frankenstein, who ascends Montanvert to elevate his spirits: “I remembered the effect that the view of the tremendous and ever-moving glacier had produced upon my mind when I first saw it. 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” (100). But Shelley's narrative does not stop with a simple affirmation of the Romantic relationship between humanity and nature, in fact the passages which follow severely complicates that view. Victor's subsequent description reveals the mortal danger inherent in the setting: “the slightest sound, such as even speaking in a loud voice, produces a concussion of air sufficient to draw destruction upon the head of the speaker” (101). This self-destructive effect of human agency in the realm of the sublime recurs in the passages which follow. Though observation of the “awful majesty” of Mont Blanc initially calms Victor—“My heart, which was before sorrowful, now swelled with something like joy” (102)—a verbal address to the heavens triggers an immediate and terrible answer, not by falling rocks, but by the appearance of Victor Frankenstein's wretched creation, the seed of his own destruction.

Why stage Victor's first encounter with the mature fiend in the sublime landscape? One interpretation attributes to Shelley an intention to “feminize” Romanticism by subverting the Romantic ideal of solitude in favor of the civilizing power of society. Those vast landscapes, then, “provide a fitting home for essential, uncivilized human nature—for the monster” (Poovey, 336). But the social institutions depicted by the novel

being equally problematic, Shelley's distrust of the contemporary legal machinery especially obvious, I prefer to read the encounter as a symbolic repetition of Victor's original error. The lone ascent into the mountains recalls his isolated experiments, his probing of nature's highest secrets. The mortal danger threatened by the rocky path echoes the moral danger of scientific hubris. Finally, Victor's verbal challenge to the Alpine peaks, an assertion of individuality in the face of terrible nature, refigures his transgressive creation of life.

This analogy serves to critique a conception of the sublime as merely an aesthetic category. It challenges the Romantic view of mortality as a negotiable limit of human comprehension and agency; a border to be overcome by transcendental creative power. Shelley neglects this lofty idealism, first, by an awareness of the human being as a physical body. Her "version" of Percy's Mont Blanc adds a layer of irony, as the hero seeking spiritual elevation in the natural environment finds himself physically threatened by the very object of enlightenment. Even more pointedly, she calls into question the ends of the Romantic desire to engineer the transcendent, which inevitably results in abomination and destruction of the human. For the novel, the sublime functions as a kind of secular metaphysical, the hard, non-negotiable boundary of the human beyond which passive observation may be beneficial, but exercise of human agency brings about self-destruction. In short, to be a true Romantic hero is to invite obliteration.

Melville makes explicit from the first paragraph of *Moby Dick* Ishmael's expectations for the therapeutic in human interactions with nature: "Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul... I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can." A celebration of nature very

much in the Romantic mode, here, already, we have evidence of Melville working through a discourse similar to Shelley's. But does he subvert the Romantics, as Shelley, or merely confirm their world view? Merrill D. Whitburn extrapolates from Melville's many overt references to the Romantic sublime in *Moby Dick* an intention by the author to create the sublime quest narrative par excellence, and to simultaneously evoke in the reader the necessary awe and wonder to provide a sublime experience. "Writers may encourage readers to experience a world as sublime, but few writers succeed in actually evoking sublimity. Melville is one of these few" (Whitburn, 38). Yet even within that opening paragraph, Ishmael reveals an awareness of the darker side of the sublime, an association of the sublime quest with a kind of death wish. "This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship." (Melville, 3). At what cost the sublime? Is Ishmael's whaling voyage therapy, or suicide?

Some proponents of the "American Romanticism" theory have distinguished the American strain, at least as expressed through its use of the sublime landscape, by exactly that emphasis on the perils of nature. "Most authors used the sublime just for romantic scene setting; but Hawthorne and Thoreau were more interested in the symbolic aspects, though they were sensitive to the danger of overidealizing the wilderness and not recognizing its inherent perils. Melville, of course, clearly perceived this paradox" (Hovanec, 44). As we have seen, though, the Americans were not the first to recognize the physical perils of the sublime, nor to exploit its symbolic aspects. It seems likely, then, that Melville and his contemporaries did not so much innovate this modulation of the Romantic sensibility as work within a post-Frankensteinian discourse already

skeptical of idealism. Whether Hawthorne and Thoreau were cognizant of this fact, or whether they developed their response to the Romantics independent of Shelley, it is neither possible to determine, nor particularly important to this analysis. I do find it likely that Melville recognized the kinship between the American literary movement and this female novelist from an earlier generation, both of whom strove to distinguish themselves against the powerful hegemony of European male voices. In his book on the legacy of *Frankenstein* in 19th Century literature, Chris Baldick even creates space for a feminist interpretation of *Moby Dick*, noting how “Melville's men appear to be redeemed to the extent that they are feminized” (Baldick, 80).

Mary and Herman don't live together happily ever after, however, for once again the later author adds his own points of subtle articulation to make relevant the earlier discourse. Here Baldick's analysis is indispensable to showing how, though lacking the overt science-fiction aspects of *Frankenstein*, the world of *Moby Dick* exhibits the kind of technological dystopia Shelley's novel warned against. Baldick recalls the averted catastrophe of Walton's voyage, the one positive outcome in *Frankenstein*, in his reading of *Moby Dick* as “a study of what happens when the crew fails to mutiny against Frankensteinian leadership” (Baldick, 77). He describes further how Ahab makes monsters of both himself and his crew in the “American urge to subdue Nature by mechanical efficiency” (Baldick, 81).

Shelley's novel, however mythological in intention, and however generalizable Victor's story may be to humanity at large, remains a story of human exceptionalism. Though she challenges both the outcomes of heroic action, and the practice of solitude, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* retains the individual agency of the classical hero. He labors

in an alchemical tradition opposed to the scientific trends of the day. His accumulation of knowledge exceeds his peers at a disproportionate rate. Though to his own detriment, he does actually discover and command the elemental forces of nature. Though we may read the novel as a cautionary tale about any human endeavor, the consequences are only proportional to the stakes. If Victor loses big, it's only because he plays big. We may be tempted to attribute a similar exceptionalism to Melville's Ahab. Certainly an extraordinary character, his quest for vengeance against the white whale drives the story. But as Jonathan Arac shows, Melville carefully complicates that agency. "In its broadest structure, the plot is a satire on human impotence: St. George comes up to the dragon, and it does him in; there's really no contest" (Arac, 45). Furthermore, Ahab does not proceed in his task unaided, but relies on a crew to carry out his deeds. This crew, though ostensibly diverse and expressive of dissent, also suffer from lack of agency. Melville describes Ahab and his crew as a functional singularity. In the microcosm of society that is the Pequod, all force of righteousness, wickedness, or indifference only provide ballast for the status quo:

"Here, then, was this grey-headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job's whale round the world, at the head of a crew, too, chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals—morally enfeebled also, by the incompetence of mere unaided virtue or right-mindedness in Starbuck, the invulnerable jollity of indifference and recklessness in Stubb, and the pervading mediocrity in Flask. Such a crew, so officered, seemed specially picked and packed by some infernal fatality to help him to his monomaniac revenge" (186-87).

So the society plunges towards its fate, provoked by everyone from the dissenters to those just doing their jobs. By transferring the blame for transgression from one exceptional individual to society, Melville emphasizes how much more “fallen” he considers his world, how mechanistic the technological world-view renders those who labor within it.

Baldick's analysis reveals a world in which the dangers implied by Shelley's novel have escalated to a frightening degree. I would argue that the shift between novels is even more profound, and, again, the change is exemplified in Melville's use of the sublime landscape. If *Frankenstein* complicates human agency and cautions against a creative imperative beyond human limits, *Moby Dick* challenges even the desire to know and experience the sublime; its project is epistemological rather than practical. Ishmael recognizes that the therapeutic aspect of the sublime landscape flows from its very inhospitableness to the human, that true enlightenment represents a kind of self-destruction. In addition to the fiery Promethean myth that drives *Frankenstein*, that of a man tempted by god-like power over his environment, Ishmael cites the watery myth of Narcissus to describe the appeal of the sea, that of a man who “could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned” (5). His temptation, the temptation of the sublime landscape, is not for physical power or some external secret of nature, but for an impossible understanding of himself.

The fate of Pip provides an instructive illustration of Melville's ontology of the sublime and the danger of knowledge. Accidentally cast away from the ship and temporarily abandoned by the harpoon boats, Pip finds himself alone in the open ocean, and has an unfiltered experience of the sublime that would be the envy of any good Romantic. He is “carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the

unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps.” The transcendent moment did not elevate his spirit, however, but “drowned the infinite of his soul.” The cost of metaphysical knowledge is exactly Pip's humanity: “He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense” (414).

Please indulge me a fanciful visual metaphor for the relationship between these two novels. Shelley's *Frankenstein* calls up a vast field devoid of color—Alpine mountaintops, glaciers, Arctic ice floes—in which the dark, hideous creature lives and thrives, and against which he gains definition, a minuscule black blot on a white landscape. Melville's *Moby Dick* plays out against a landscape of deep, inscrutable seas, an almost infinite darkness surrounding the unconquerable white whale. Together they compose an ideogram balanced in its very difference: a yin-yang, a symbol even more appropriate for its absence from the Western approach to defining humanity's relationship to nature. Taken together, the two novels provide an almost complete challenge to Enlightenment philosophy and the concept of a knowable external truth.

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