

On the Nobility of Victor in Frankenstein

“He must have been a noble creature in his better days.”

- Walton’s observation of Victor, page 25

My understanding of Victor is very much parallel to my understanding of HJ in the NYer article you gave us - it’s a very, very good sort of auxiliary source for reading simultaneously to Frankenstein. Both are scientists (ethnic ones - I do believe it’s a characteristic of note that Walton - an Englishman - mentions Victor’s “foreign accent” and that HJ is a Chinese national being covered by Dana Goodyear - a middle-aged American white woman - in that both of these signify them as members of the outgroup to the traditional Western moral authority) controversially pushing the limits of human creation, yet where the two separate in my comprehension is actually in nobility, in that I can barely imagine a more noble cause of science than the gene-deep eradication of a fatal disease carrying immensely shameful and repugnant connotations, and that Victor on the other hand seems more motivated by the notion of science for science’s sake - which I take to be a noble cause, in that it was the motivation of individuals like Democritus, Aristotle, Copernicus, Kepler, Bacon, Einstein, and Penrose, the knowledge and discoveries of whom our understanding of natural philosophy is built upon - but the “unnatural” consequences stemming such from an abstract motivation are much more difficult to morally justify.

The quote from Walton on the surface is an observation about Victor’s demeanor and I actually take that to be the final depth of its meaning. The context of the sentence and narrative moment in which the above quote is removed I take to be indicative of its true meaning; we hear Walton describe the beautiful stranger he pulls from the ice onto his ship: “he must have been a noble creature in his better days, being even now in wreck so attractive and amiable.” Walton supplies his reader (Margaret) with a

bountiful litany of pseudo-homoerotic descriptions of Victor's countenance and this is among the first of many in our introduction to Frankenstein; I find it very plausible if not truthful that in the context of romantic English and Mary Shelley's excellent prose that her use of the word "noble" here is simply a description of a certain dignity and presence that Victor may have once possessed before became consumed by his obsession and the consequences of his actions, that once looked healthier, more composed, and perhaps more regal or respectable, which aligns with a romantic connotation of nobility. His better days, therefore, refer to a time when *his appearance* marked by the guilt, fear, and torment that his creation brought upon him; I think that our understanding of her use of the word "nobility" referring to Frankenstein's moral degradation, which Walton couldn't have known about at this point in the story, is an anachronistic application of our own comprehension of the story rather than its actual contextual and symbolic meaning.