

**Emotive Weather:
Morality in the World of *Frankenstein***

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Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* explores a plethora of scientific and philosophical phenomena unsettled to this day. She articulates, for instance, the complex moral relationship between emotion and weather. Victor Frankenstein's creation, the nameless creature, discovers the ethical basis of the novel through the DeLaceys—an impoverished family that acts unwittingly as his guardian—from whom he learns to “admire their virtues and to deprecate the vices of mankind” (Shelley 90). In other words, *Frankenstein* largely pivots on this model of praising good behavior and condemning bad behavior. This essay considers professor Laura Otis's treatment of “emotion metaphors” for rejected creatures and introduces two hierarchical binaries that encapsulate vice and virtue (hubris/self-effacement) as well as turbulent and tranquil natural phenomena (storms/fair weather) in order to illustrate the moral concept that I call *emotive weather*.

In her essay, “*Frankenstein: Representing the Emotions of Unwanted Creatures*,” Otis argues that the creature is acculturated unhappily to hate and seek revenge, not that either is derived from innate character flaw. In Otis's view, the creature is a proxy for any unwanted being whose “life-affirming impulses,” because they are short-lived, contribute to a vicious cycle of hate (Otis 19). In turn, this learned social force binds to natural forces to produce what Otis calls “emotion metaphors” (19). Furthermore, she contends that the temporal landscapes within emotion metaphors serve to approximate the mental states of Shelley's characters; that weather directly mimics emotion and vice versa. For the creature, Otis claims that Shelley dramatizes his traumatic emotions through the depictions of climatic extremes, specifically raging “mobile forces” like fire and wind, as well as desolate icy arenas (32). In Otis's view, all extremes of climate are categorized as wholly unpleasant forces.

Though her essay is not limited to analyzing the negative, or at least strained, relations between emotions and weather, Otis becomes so invested in unwanted creatures that she not only reduces this relation to mere reflection, but also focuses solely on “painful emotions” at the expense of their positive counterparts (Otis 30). She assumes that weather and emotion are synchronized and that natural forces “represent” feeling, further degrading their intricate relation to a mere demonstration of pathetic fallacy (18). Moreover, Otis fails to recognize that when taught by natural in addition to social forces, characters' learned emotional and physical *comfort* proves as common and valuable as emotional and physical *pain*. In this essay, I will analyze two hierarchical, morally opposed binaries—hubris/self-effacement and storms/fair weather—that seek to correct these flaws through the experiences of Victor Frankenstein and Henry Clerval, in relation to Mont Blanc.¹ Furthermore, I argue that within this framework, both virtuous and vicious behavior, weather, and emotions develop sequentially. In reality, gods as agents of weather punish those who exhibit hubris with a torrent of wind, rain, clouds, lightning, and darkness, and reward those who exhibit self-effacement with a gentle breeze, sublime scenery,

¹ Hubris is defined as insolent pride or presumption, and self-effacement as an act of not claiming attention for oneself (OED).

and light; as a result, storms provoke emotional and physical pain, while fair weather induces emotional and physical comfort.

First, it is important to consider that because of weather's active response to character behavior, there must be an intelligence behind it. Shelley's romantic impulse to overdramatize the natural world in her novel lends itself to the possibility that gods, however latent or hard to detect, are candidates for such an intelligence. Popular criticism of the novel also commonly emphasizes the presence of gods and godlike behavior, especially in relation to Victor. While *Frankenstein* lacks substantial evidence to fully support the existence of gods, their ubiquitous implications both in and out of the text suggests that the force actively controlling weather can be designated as "gods of weather," if not Shelley herself. These gods arbitrate matters of behavior by maintaining virtue and punishing vice, adhering to the novel's moral basis. This supernatural critique through weather is homeostatic and therefore parallel to Otis's "logic of rejection," which suggests that if abandoned beings are oppressed, they ensure that their enemies experience equally painful emotions. Associations across the binaries—hubris with storms, and self-effacement with fair weather—follow this homeostatic system.

The gods of weather punish those who embody hubris by deploying storms that teach their victims indistinguishable emotional and physical pain. In Greek tragedy, hubris describes an overweening pride towards the gods, leading to nemesis (OED). Many times Victor not only defies gods, but projects that he is one himself. Instead of observing and appreciating his surroundings on a journey to Mont Blanc, Victor degrades the gods, arrogating to himself the sublimity of nature in celebrating "[his] own beautiful lake" and "[his] beloved country" (Shelley 49, emphasis mine). He demonstrates "egotistical sublime" (Keats's coinage for the imaginative projection of the internal self onto the outer world) where he assumes that all of the magnificent qualities of nature revolve around him and are his to possess. The gods of weather immediately respond to Victor's hubris, as he sees "the lightings playing" over Mont Blanc and a "storm appeared to approach rapidly" (49). The higher powers oppress Victor's insolent behavior, surrounding him with intimidating and violent torrents of lightning, clouds, rain, and darkness capable of surmounting his hubris. Consequently, the storm produces "painful emotions" in addition to physical pain within Victor (Otis 18). Shelley shows that both types of pain he learns are almost indistinguishable through the ambiguity in her language. As the storm brews, Victor admits to feeling severe "anguish," which signifies either an emotional or physical state—a kind of impasse which he demonstrates speaking reflexively and ambivalently in the first person (Shelley 49). In creating a storm, the gods intend to provoke these painful responses punitively for those who express hubris, which then serve to terminate and replace the hubris with self-effacement as its virtuous counterpart.

Contrary to hubris and storms, the gods of weather reward those who exhibit self-effacement with fair weather, which alleviates grief and admits comfort. While Victor has demonstrated hubris, he also exhibits moments of self-effacement. For example, at a separate time on Mont Blanc, Victor displays his humility as well as his respect for the gods when he

“ceased...to bend before any being less almighty than that which had created and ruled the elements” (Shelley 64). Victor understates, with obliging reluctance, humanity’s inferior power to the eminent gods by honoring their creations that surround him. Consequently, the gods reward Victor’s humility with the “most terrific guise” in which the “winds whispered” (64, 65). The tranquil and sublime fair weather compels Victor, as he states “I alighted, and threw myself on the grass weighed down by horror and despair” (65). At this moment, Victor submits to the grandeur of his surroundings, falling back onto the fertile ground in an act of literal self-erasure: a partial disciple of Keats’s “negative capability,” he becomes a part of nature rather than attempting to control or manipulate it. Indistinguishable from this physical comfort are the winds that romantically soothe his sorrows and replenish his gaiety, as the “maternal nature bade [him] weep no more” (65). Furthermore, Shelley treats the associations directly juxtaposed within the binaries—storms with fair weather, and hubris with self-effacement—differently from those across the binaries: throughout her novel, she favors storms and hubris, because they are stronger and more salutary, over fair weather and self-effacement.

Shelley grants an immunity to the imagery of storms over fair weather, as they are constant and draconian forces that always prevail, whereas fair weather proves to be weak and temporary. In this same voyage to Mont Blanc, Victor witnesses the hierarchical relationship between storms and fair weather when he is teased with “sublime and magnificent scenes,” but the following morning “the rain was pouring in torrents, and thick mists hid the summits of the mountains” (Shelley 66). Apart from critiquing characters’ moral behavior, storms and fair weather constantly jockey for dominance throughout the novel. The ongoing battle between these two extremes of weather follows Shelley’s theme of mutability, yet is decisive in showing that storms inevitably conquer fair weather, no matter how magnificent and sacrosanct it may seem. For example, the storm in this instance disturbs—and ultimately overcomes—the peace of the fair weather. In her essay, Otis presents a pattern of natural forces surrounding and entrapping objects in their function of demonstrating the most extreme forms of emotion (Otis 32). Similarly, Mont Blanc is depicted as a sacred haven that conveys “majesty,” but the power of the storm is able to dominate this profundity: it engulfs the light of fair weather and establishes a mask of darkness (Shelley 67). In a literal sense, the storm prohibits Victor’s ability to see the rejuvenating fair weather, which would otherwise allow him to experience alleviation from his melancholy and be restored to a degree of composure.

While innocent readers of the text would critique hubris because it is vicious, Shelley privileges it over self-effacement because hubris leads to greater success in the acquirement or expansion of knowledge and discovery, while self-effacement is characterized by a “wise passiveness” (in Wordsworth’s phrase) that yields no results. Victor admonishes Robert Walton that a hubristic, single-minded devotion to the “acquirement of knowledge” is tantamount to an aspiration of becoming “greater than his nature will allow” (Shelley 31). Victor demonstrates this effect in his “longing to penetrate the secrets of nature” and in his pursuit of “nature to her hiding places” (21, 33). He feverishly desires to unravel the mysteries of heaven and earth, whether they

pertain internally to man or apply externally to nature. Victor exploits this passion, excessively attempting to manipulate and scrutinize nature, in order to benefit his own scientific endeavors. And yet, his arrogant intentions result in unprecedented scientific achievements; his hubris fosters the development of his imagination's potential and capabilities. For example, Victor explains that the "energy," or hubris, "of [his] purpose alone" motivated him in his labors of creating the creature (34).² On the contrary, self-effacement merely allows for an immersion of the self into an environment. When Henry Clerval delves into the "Fairy-land" of nature, he can only appreciate and observe the magnificence of his surroundings (112). Unlike Victor, Clerval abstains from manipulating nature for personal benefit and remains a mere flaneur. Regardless of his respectable, fervent passion for the outdoors, Clerval's self-effacement actually limits the extent of his knowledge of the world, whereas Victor advances the prophecies of his imagination in becoming the center or controller of nature. On the basis of productivity, Clerval's fantastical and passive mind is inferior to Victor's active and assertive mind—one uncannily similar to that of the novel's author.

In her time, Shelley, like women in general, was viewed as stereotypically frivolous and simple in her range of emotions. *Frankenstein* comes as a rebuke to her contemporaries in revealing the true intricacies of a mind largely occupied with skepticism. Shelley dramatizes this internal and external tension by projecting onto her novel two rivalrous moods consistent with the realities of her life.³ These moods bifurcate into the binaries of hubris/self-effacement and storms/fair weather, which ultimately contend with one another in the final pages. That is, moods govern the success of a character's life. Between the self-effacing mood and the hubristic mood, the latter, akin to storms, is not only preferred but inexhaustible because it is "for ever ardent" and worth "craving" (Shelley 165). It exceeds to the point where hubris, as a function of the imagination, seeks to dominate rather than dwell in the possibilities of mere being. However in the face of ultimate extinction, neither mood holds more value than the other because death inevitably overcomes all "light, feeling, and sense," and is the only state where one can "find rest" and "happiness" (166). Parallel with the regenerative cycle of life and death, emotions and weather will forever unite to form eternal moods, for both mutually reinforce one another regardless of a character's moral behavior in their lifetime. Moods live on unaffected by their passing inhabitants as they become "lost in darkness and distance" (166).

² Victor earlier defines this same purpose as a resolution to "pioneer a new way, to explore the unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation" (Shelley 28). Evidently, the sole meaning or purpose of Victor's life is to breach the inherent laws of nature and perform an act of the gods: re-animating life in a lifeless form. Because such "energy" is the intimate manifestation and self-sustaining force of this "purpose," it is hubristic by all implications.

³ In his poem "The Moods," W. B. Yeats suggests a distinction between emotions and moods: where emotions are considered fluid, temporary, and affective, moods are considered solid, eternal, and intellectual. Literary critic and biographer Richard Ellmann writes that "Moods...are conspicuously, but not exclusively, emotional or temperamental" (Ellmann 82). Adding to this description, I make the claim that the non-exclusive component of moods can, for the purposes of this essay, be represented in the image of weather. Moods, therefore, are defined as the juxtaposition of emotion and weather.

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