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Religious Existentialism of Victor Frankenstein's Obsession in Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

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ABSTRACT

The aims of this study are to analyse a classic science-fiction novel Frankenstein written by Mary Shelley using Soren Kierkegaard's religious existentialism. The novel tells about the life journey of Victor Frankenstein as the main character. Victor Frankenstein is a genius man who is mastering science and wants to create human being from his knowledge and combine it with supernatural elements. Victor feels like he can create a creature like human. With all his ambition, he tries to build human being. Unfortunately his ambition comes into misery when his creature turns into monster. This thesis focuses on Victor Frankenstein life process. This study apply the theory of Existentialism to analyse the main point by using Soren Kierkegaard's existentialism theory (Aesthetic, Ethic and Religious stages of life) to Victor Frankenstein Obsession, and it uses descriptive qualitative research. As the result, it finds out that Victor Frankenstein's life existentialism was led by his obsessional character.

Keywords: Aesthetic, Ethic, Obsession, Religious

INTRODUCTION

Literature has limitless meanings. It can be broadly defined as written works created with aesthetic value and containing precise meaning. Literary works are imaginative writings distinguished by the author's artistic intentions, setting them apart from ordinary reading materials. Many believe that literary works are merely imaginative expressions (Leszl, 2006). However, literature is not just about imagination; it also presents aesthetic perspectives that reflect real human life, embedded in the characters and plot of a story.

Literary works, as products of human thought, continue to evolve and spread across the world. Their existence combines factual writing with fiction (Aras, 2015). Humans naturally seek to establish their existence, as everyone has the right to express themselves. In literature, characters often embody the philosophical concept of existentialism, which promotes living as an active, self-aware, and authentic individual in pursuit of subjective truth (Solomon, 2004). A person's way of life is closely tied to their obsession with proving their existence. In psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1925) describes obsessional syndrome as a mental disorder where individuals become fixated on irrational practices, convincing themselves that their desires are inherently right.

Obsession as a form of existentialism occurs when individuals strive excessively to prove their will and justify their beliefs. In *Frankenstein*, obsession plays a central role in shaping the protagonist's life, causing significant changes in his character. Existentialism emphasizes concrete experiences, which can have various interpretations. Key existentialist thinkers include Søren Kierkegaard (religious existentialism), Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche (will to power), and Albert Camus (absurdist existentialism). This analysis will specifically apply Kierkegaard's concept of religious existentialism. Existentialism not only defines what a person is but also emphasizes their ability to reshape themselves through existence (Stumpf & Fieser, 2012). Kierkegaard, regarded as the father of existentialism, proposes three stages of human life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious (Solomon, 2004). In literary works, existentialism can be observed through a character's experiences.

Based on the discussion above, this analysis examines how existentialist theory applies to literature, focusing on *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. The study will analyze Victor Frankenstein, an ambitious scientist determined to create life using his knowledge (Shelley, 1818). This analysis will apply Kierkegaard's existentialist stages—Aesthetic, Ethical, and Religious—as the primary theoretical framework, with New Criticism as a supporting theory. Kierkegaard argues that there are no absolute moral standards limiting a person's existence and that faith is fundamental in making choices. Only through faith can an individual achieve their true self (Solomon, 2004).

Frankenstein is Mary Shelley's most famous novel. Born in 1797, Shelley was a prominent classic novelist. The original Frankenstein tells the story of Victor Frankenstein, an obsessed scientist who seeks to merge science and the supernatural to create a living being. His obsession leads to the creation of what he calls a "monster." However, upon completing his experiment, Victor is overwhelmed by fear and abandons his creation, horrified by its physical appearance. His guilt and fear make him ill, while the monster, left alone, suffers from rejection and cruelty due to its appearance—an outcome caused by Victor himself.

This analysis explores how Victor Frankenstein's obsession influences his life's course, ultimately revealing his existential journey. His transformation aligns with Kierkegaard's existentialist framework, which consists of three stages: Aesthetic, Ethical, and Religious.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existentialism

Existentialism is a significant concept in contemporary philosophy. In literature, existentialism has a strong connection to both literary and philosophical contexts (Endraswara, 2006). It is a branch of philosophy that focuses on the existence of an individual or something. The term was first introduced by Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), who is widely recognized as the father of existentialism in the history of Western philosophy (Raharjo, 2018). However, existentialism is also associated with other influential figures, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, all of whom are regarded as great philosophers.

As the father of existentialism, Kierkegaard's ideas significantly influenced many writers and thinkers. His existentialist philosophy, often referred to as Religious Existentialism, emerged as a reaction to Hegel's perspective, which portrayed humans as passive beings, mere observers with no active role, similar to moviegoers. Hegel's paradigm suggested that individuals were not responsible for their actions, as they were merely part of the collective crowd. Kierkegaard strongly opposed this view. To counter Hegel's ideas, he developed his own existentialist theory, which emphasizes individual experience. According to Kierkegaard, human existence progresses through three stages: the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage, and the religious stage.

Aesthetical Stages

The aesthetic stage is a phase in which a person lives in the moment, without deep commitments to any particular path. While they are not entirely impulsive, they only pursue long-term goals if they find them appealing, abandoning them when boredom sets in or when something more exciting emerges. They view life as a series of possibilities to be explored and enjoyed

rather than as a set of projects to accomplish or ideals to uphold. Essentially passive, aesthetic individuals seek satisfaction in external factors beyond their control.

Kierkegaard argues that human actions are not always driven by rationality alone but also by free will and spontaneous emotions. Aesthetic choices fall under this category, as individuals in this stage prioritize their immediate emotional experiences. This suggests that their emotions remain unstable. In the aesthetic stage, people focus solely on personal pleasure, driven by instinct, hedonistic desires, and mood-based decisions.

The aesthetic stage represents an authentic yet morally degraded way of life (Wirahadi, 2008). Individuals in this phase reject universal moral standards and specific religious beliefs, seeing them as limitations on their freedom and choices (Stumpf & Fieser, 2012). Consequently, human nature in this stage is described as more negative than positive. However, experiencing this phase is a natural part of life. Without personal convictions, individuals risk adopting others' certainties instead. Thus, in the aesthetic stage, humans are deeply driven by emotional experiences and desires.

Victor Frankenstein, a brilliant scientist, embodies this aesthetic mindset. His desire to create life stems from his refusal to accept the natural limitation that humans cannot create other humans. He rejects the prevailing belief that scientific knowledge alone is insufficient to produce a being akin to a human.

However, if a person is entirely guided by aesthetic emotions, what happens to their soul? According to Kierkegaard, they fall into despair. Without a clear sense of direction or purpose, they face two choices: remain in the aesthetic stage, which may lead to existential crisis and even self-destruction, or transition into the ethical stage of life. Kierkegaard argues that every person must decide whether to live aesthetically, ethically, or progress further into the religious stage (Kierkegaard, 2006).

Ethical Stages

The second stage is the ethical stage. In the aesthetic stage, humans tend to be influenced by pleasure and personal taste. However, in the ethical stage, they begin to recognize rules and conduct based on reason (Stumpf & Fieser, 2012). According to the standard interpretation, Kierkegaard presents the ethicist as someone who embodies this crucial understanding of human existence.

The ethical stage focuses on "choosing oneself," where an ethical person sees themselves as a goal. While the aesthetic individual is preoccupied with external things, the ethical person directs their attention inward, taking control of their own nature. They engage in self-examination to discover their true desires. What matters is not necessarily whether they achieve their goals but the extent to which they fully commit to their actions (Roth, 2003).

Objective thinking is relevant in fields like logic, nature, mathematics, and history, where knowledge is governed by necessity and remains independent of individual perspectives. In the ethical stage, humans gain control over their emotions and align them with universal moral standards. Thus, an ethical person does not live solely for themselves but adheres to humanistic values.

Kierkegaard compares the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical stage to someone moving beyond temporary sexual desires and embracing marriage with all its responsibilities. In his book *Either/Or*, he explains that the ethical stage is a higher form of life than the aesthetic one. It is only when a person reaches the ethical stage that they truly choose themselves—their absolute self. Absolute choice means choosing oneself according to one's ultimate values.

Religious Stages

The final and highest stage of human existentialism, as described by Kierkegaard, is the religious stage. At this stage, humans begin to realize the reality of God. It is a phase where individuals embrace their authenticity and face God as a singular entity. The ethical and religious stages are distinguished by their different understandings of the pursuit of the good for its own sake (Klarer, 2004).

The religious stage is not influenced by human values alone; rather, it is characterized by the recognition of God's existence. Kierkegaard illustrates this concept through the figure of Abraham from the Holy Scriptures. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son because he believed in God's command. From a rational perspective, his actions may seem irrational and inhumane. However, from the standpoint of a religious person, disobeying God's command would be sinful. By following God's will, Abraham transcended ethical principles and entered a paradox, thus transitioning from the ethical stage to the religious stage.

A religious person will face two kinds of paradoxes. The first is the paradox of God, which cannot be explained rationally. For example, if God is wholly good, why do crime and suffering exist in the world? There is no way to comprehend this paradox except through individual faith. To accept it, a religious person must rely on their subjectivity—a belief rooted in true faith in God (Abidin, 2006). The second paradox is anxiety, which differs from fear. Anxiety refers to something unreal, uncertain, and incoherent. Religious individuals believe that living in devotion to God is the only way to escape this anxiety (Wirahadi, 2008).

Thus, only those with true faith and unwavering belief in God can endure this stage of religious existentialism. Only the righteous will persevere and attain the highest stage of human existentialism.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a library-based approach, including reading various references, books on related theories, and analyzing the entire content of the novel. It utilizes a qualitative descriptive method and existentialism theory, following several steps: reading **Frankenstein** by Mary Shelley, understanding its key content, collecting evidence related to the issue, classifying relevant evidence, dividing the data into different stages (aesthetic, ethical, and religious), and concluding the analysis. The study sources include the **Frankenstein** novel, literary theory books, and theses as references. Additionally, since the research requires information about the author's biography, an online biography website is also needed as a source.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on Soren Kierkegaard's existentialism theory discussed in the previous chapter, he divided existentialism into three phases: the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage, and the highest stage, which is the religious stage. Kierkegaard explained that humans in existentialism go through these three phases to achieve their existence.

Aesthetical Stages

The aesthetical stage is where humans experience boredom as the root of evil (Roth, 2003). To escape this boredom, people seek to express their existentialism by pursuing new experiences that provide a sense of power and overconfidence. This idea is reflected in the novel through the life of Victor Frankenstein. Victor, a genius studying science, believes he understands the concept of creating life through scientific means. His aesthetic side is deeply connected to his scientific ambition, which began when he was thirteen after discovering the works of Cornelius Agrippa.

After reading Agrippa's writings, Victor's interest in science grew into an obsession. His father warned him not to waste time on Agrippa's ideas but failed to explain why, which only fueled Victor's curiosity. As a result, his ambition intensified, driven by emotion rather than reason, leading to choices that would ultimately harm him. Victor also felt that science alone was insufficient. The writers he admired discussed supernatural elements, as they were ancient scholars who explored topics like ghosts and spirits. This led him to expand his knowledge into the supernatural, unaware of the dangers of studying such subjects without proper guidance.

Upon entering university, Victor became interested in chemistry, which played a crucial role in science. He immersed himself in scientific studies, constantly reading and consulting his professors. His passion turned into obsession, as he believed he had mastered the secrets of human construction.

Convinced that he could create life, he dedicated himself entirely to the task, sacrificing sleep and personal well-being in pursuit of his goal.

As his ambition consumed him, Victor began conducting experiments, making observations, and investigating everything related to his vision. He became fascinated by supernatural horrors, analyzing every detail as if creating life was his sole purpose. This obsession changed him, making him indifferent to his surroundings and even his own health. His only focus was the success of his experiment.

However, when the experiment failed to meet his expectations, Victor was devastated. The result was not what he had imagined, and he felt utterly defeated. His dream was shattered, leaving him in a state of deep stress and illness. The monstrous appearance of his creation horrified him, filling him with fear and regret. Unable to face what he had done, he avoided returning to the place where he had brought the creature to life. This overwhelming fear marked the end of Victor's aesthetical stage and the beginning of the next phase: the ethical stage.

Ethical Stages

Kierkegaard described an ethical stage is where human leave his satisfaction or his temporary desire and starting to accepting all obligations. at this stage, individual can control and identify himself. Mean that in this stage, an individual starting to have his conscious back. In Ethical stage, human starting to have his “free choice” that human can begin his free consciously choice.

Because at this stage human can have his conscious choice, therefore human can control himself even he can control his ambition. He is starting to have himself in reality and concrete option under rational consideration. Kierkegaard stated that in ethical stage, human have attempted to achieve a moral value though human being is still trapped inside himself and is still being immanent.

This existence stage come to Victor's Frankenstein life with his direction of thought and he realize that he has experience alienation where because of his ambition, he does not want to socialize even he does not want to meet his family and locked up himself to focuses on the creature being which he was intended to create. When he starting to get sick and fear because of seeing the monster. Clerval his close friend come to help him. Here, Victor starting to get his conscious back and having he as the old Victor before his ambition came.

Victor has back to his consciousness and starting to think that all his time was getting wasted by having the fatal passion of making monster. He could think straight and become friendly like before. Slowly, Victor realize that his obsession did not make him into something good but precisely bad. When Victor realize it, he starting to realize his ethical stage where he understand about humanity and his life autonomy. Victor starting to get enjoy being himself, he can get along with his friend like before, answering the letter from his family and even he come back to Geneva, come back to his family. He met his father, and his father told him what

happen at that time when Victor seems like someone who did not care about family.

According to his father who can meet Victor after a long time, his father observed Victor with pain, it means that he understand Victor was suffer a lot because of his habit and his guiltless life on his ambition. But in this ethical stage Victor back to his consciousness and become man who is fit for society. He starting to life with his family and having a moral value inside himself like before he is getting influenced by his ambition. Although Victor has back to his soul and realize what he has done. He is still himself which is not responsible towards what he has done. He never back to the place where he left the unfinished monster he made. He asked his friend to check the apartment where he leaves the monster. And the monster has gone. It means that the monster is alive and wandering around somewhere. Here, Victor still did not realize which one is the wrong point he has made.

The movement from ethical stage to religious stage of human is because he is already experienced something which at the end he decided to reflect himself and bring back himself toward the nature. In Ethical stage, Victor does not realize that he has already making the monster become devil. It happen when the monster started to kill his family one by one starting from his little cousin William, in this case, no one knows who the murderer of an innocent child like William is. But there is a false defendant. Everyone said that Justine is the killer of William, whereas actually Justine did not do that. That's how one by one of her family come to be a murderer victim.

After realize that it has been to years after he releasing a monster and listening to the explanation of Justine who was false accused to be murderer. Victor understands that the killer of his family is not anyone else but a monster he created. Victor tried to looking for a way to solve this. Suddenly, the monster appears in front of him.

Victor was shock and afraid of the monster physical appearance. But he can hold his anger toward the monster. He feels disgust, but his rage and his hatred toward the monster cannot be held anymore. The monster knows that he would get that kind of reaction, but the monster still continue to approach Victor and asking Victor a solution to handle this condition. The monster told Victor everything. The monster told that Victor has been make the monster suffer a lot because of the physical appearance Victor gave to the monster. And monster feels like Victor bring monster into trouble by creating that kind of physical appearance without any responsibility.

Unfortunately, Victor cannot accept that. Victor still consider that all accident happen over the monster life is not because of Victor. It is because the monster itself. But what happen to Victor's family it because what monster has done. Victor still seeing the monster as something horrible and blame the monster all the way.

The differences in ethical stages and religious stages is that in ethical stages, even human has already reach his morality and consciousness; he is still himself which is sometimes do not want to be blamed. He do not have his responsibility over something he has done on aesthetical stages. This is what happen to Victor in this Ethical stages.

Religious Stages

The religious stage is the highest level of human existentialism, where a person expresses the deepest core of their being. At this stage, religion is no longer just a concrete concept but becomes an intrinsic part of human existence. It is here that an individual gains awareness of God's presence, realizing the need for divine forgiveness. In the novel, after a long journey in pursuit of revenge—only to find it unattainable—Victor enters this religious stage. He comes to understand that his actions are futile and seeks enlightenment, realizing that his suffering stems from his ambition to create life, achieve immortality, and rival God, failing to acknowledge that only God can create human beings. What brings Victor to this realization is the monster's relentless destruction of his loved ones. In his pursuit of vengeance, he chases the monster, only to be continuously led on. The monster seeks to make Victor suffer just as he has suffered. However, amidst this quest, Victor suddenly understands that his actions are meaningless. During his journey, he meets a stranger who is also driven by ambition, much like Victor once was. Victor shares his story filled with regret, warning him of the dangers of knowledge and ambition. In a moment of self-awareness, Victor recognizes that he has attempted to transcend human limitations, allowing his knowledge to turn into obsession, which then became an ambition that led him to ruin. He realizes that striving for perfection through the creation of immortality was a mistake, and his suffering comes from defying the natural order. Victor ultimately accepts that only God has the power to create life. With this realization, he abandons his ambition and journey, dying in peace after recounting his tale to Walton, who learns a valuable lesson from his tragic fate. Victor's final reflection on omnipotence and the almighty reinforces his belief in God's existence, marking the peak of his religious enlightenment. His declaration that he no longer fears anything less than the almighty signifies his absolute submission to faith before his death. The story concludes with the monster, upon discovering Victor's demise, choosing to end his own life as well.

CONCLUSION

Victor's life journey unfolds as a result of his obsession and can be divided into three stages, which align with Kierkegaard's existentialist stages of human life. The first stage, the aesthetic stage, occurs when Victor Frankenstein becomes obsessed with science and seeks the power of immortality by creating a new being. The next stage is the ethical stage, where Victor begins to develop a sense

of morality after realizing that the creature he created did not turn out as he had hoped. He starts to return to a normal life and acknowledges that he had abandoned his family, focusing solely on his obsession without considering his social surroundings. The final stage is the religious stage, in which Victor comes to understand the existence of the Almighty. He realizes that all the suffering in his life stems from his own actions. His obsession blinded him to the consequences, and he failed to recognize that only God has the power to create life. Ultimately, Victor's existential journey is driven by his obsession, and his entire life reflects Søren Kierkegaard's theory of existentialism.

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