

Investigating Religious Symbolism in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and Edgar Allan Poe's A Descent into the Maelstrom: A Stylistics Analysis

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to shed light on the use of religious symbols in Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* and Edgar Allan Poe's *A Descent into the Maelstrom*; thus, the Bible is employed as a reference for analysis. The role of religion can be seen in any literary texts. The aspect of religion can be expressed through using Saints, churches, and supernatural aspects, but in some cases, religion is implicitly used. The two selected literary works were written during a number of religious conflicts and struggles; thus, the impact of these changes can be discovered through analysing the used symbols from a religious stand. In order to figure out the religious message in the chosen literary works, St. Augustine's theory of signs is the adopted method to analyse the used symbols. The chosen theory helps in investigating objects and natural aspects as symbols used to reflect the religious reformation in the writers' societies.

Key-words: *literary text; religion; religious reformation; sign; symbol.*

المخلص

تعنى هذه الورقة البحثية بتسليط الضوء على استخدام الرموز الدينية في كل من رواية *فرانكشتاين* لماري شيلي و قصة *الإعصار* لإدغار آلان بو و هذا عن طريق استعمال كتاب الإنجيل كمرجع. للدين دور محوري في أي نص أدبي، فمن الممكن التعبير عن الجانب الديني من خلال استخدام القديسين والكنائس والميتافيزيقيات، ولكن في بعض الحالات، يتم استخدام الدين ضمناً. تمت كتابة العملين الأدبيين المختارين خلال عدد من الصراعات الدينية. وبالتالي يمكن للباحث اكتشاف تأثير هذه التغييرات من خلال تحليل الرموز المستخدمة من الجانب الديني. و من أجل معرفة الرسالة الدينية في هذين العملين، تم اعتماد نظرية الإشارات للقديس أوغسطين لتحليل الرموز المستخدمة لإظهار الإصلاح الديني في كل من المجتمعين البريطاني والأمريكي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النص أدبي؛ الدين؛ الإصلاح الديني؛ الإشارة؛ الرمز.

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1. Introduction

While reading both works of Mary Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe, two main expressions can grab the reader's attention. The first phrase in Shelley *Frankenstein* is: "The hidden laws of nature" (p.33), in which Shelley relates the supernatural changes to unknown laws, and through her story these changes are analysed from a scientific perspective. The second expression is in Poe's *A descent into the Maelstrom*: "The ways of God in nature" (*ADIMS*, line: 1), which clearly relates metaphysical changes to God's powers. Therefore, investigating the use of religious symbols in the two works seems to be fruitful to understand the authors' motives and intended messages. The stylistic analysis of religious symbolism is made relying on Saint Augustine theory of signs.

2. Saint Augustine's Theory of Signs

During the Medieval period, there was an interest in the meaning of signs by Plato, Aquinas and Augustine. The term 'sign', which had been used by them, is the same one which the Romantics referred to as 'symbol' later (Clarke, 2003). Augustine of Hippo, also known as Saint Augustine, is the most famous theologian in Western Christianity. St. Augustine argues that any religious text uses symbolic systems and figurative language. This use helps in building the connection between humans and ultimate reality (Goeder, 2008).

Signs according to St. Augustine are simply things used to signify something else. Also, he refers to symbols as a medium to reach the world beyond words (Siefert, 1999). This leads St. Augustine to divide signs (symbols) into two kinds which are natural and conventional signs (*ibid.*).

Natural signs are used by a person to deliver a message, but they refer to something else; an example that is used by St Augustine to clarify this point is the appearance of smoke which can signal fire and danger. St. Augustine also focuses on conventional signs. The latter are used in the purpose of conveying the signified action from one person's mind to another's. According to Augustine, conventional signs are the language and the signs that exist in the Scripture and religious texts. These signs can be divided on their turn into proper or figurative ones. Proper signs are the literal explanation of the word and its simple meaning. Augustine uses the word 'ox' to simplify this notion; 'ox' literally means an animal. However, the figurative signs of this word are deep. Figurative signs deliver the implicit meaning of the word, which according to Augustine, causes to "cloud communication" (Cited in Clarke, 2003, p. 2). Using the previous example of the 'ox' in the Scripture of Christianity, its meaning will change from an animal into the significance of one of the four evangelists (Siefert, 1999). Augustine explains that the signs of God are part from the conventional signs, which are delivered by a medium (man) to be understood and interpreted by others.

3. Religious Symbols in *Frankenstein*

The religious reformation that Britain witnessed during the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century created a deep effect on the literary works of that time. Mary Shelley (1797- 1851) is one of those writers who gave attention to the idea of religion than the social problems through the use of scientific themes (Watt, 2004).

Even though *Frankenstein* is considered to be a story with a scientific base, the idea of including 'creator and creature' relationship gives it a religious dimension. The used works also in the story have a tight relation to religion, such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), which is used by the created monster in his comparison between himself and Satan: "Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition, for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me" (*Frankenstein*, p. 178). Throughout the story, different objects and natural aspects are used by the writer in order to focus on religious references.

3.1 Objects as Religious Symbols

The simple explicit meaning of the surrounding objects, which the author provides in the various settings of her story, can facilitate the reading process. However, digging into the deep meanings of these objects and studying them as symbols make *Frankenstein's* valuable messages clear.

3.1.1 The Dark

Mary Shelley's novel begins by the letters that the sailor Wilton sends to his sister narrating his journey through the Northern Sea. In his first letter, Wilton pictures for his sister the surrounding darkness, which is coming towards them in a form of big cubes of ice: "We, however, lay to until the morning, fearing to encounter in the dark those large loose masses which float about after the breaking up of the ice." (*Frankenstein*, p. 15). The fear of the coming dark shapes that the author uses as an approaching danger is the representation of darkness which was brought by the Industrial Revolution, and which was a reason for the people during the early 18th century to lose their values and turn their interest into the material life rather than the spiritual one. From the religious perspective, darkness symbolizes the sins that the human being can commit and live under their shadows: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John, 1: 5).

3.1.2 The Rock

Mountains and rocks are the main settings that the events of the story take place in. Shelley, along with the confusion of the characters, has set the events in places where the stability of rocks is mentioned: "[...] for another flash discovered him to me hanging among the rocks of the nearly perpendicular ascent of Mont Saleve, a hill that bound Plainpalais on the south" (*Frankenstein*, p. 95). The rocks, even in the Bible, take the symbol of stability and confidence of the truth: "He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand." (Psalms, 40: 2).

3.1.3 The Vessel

As the story starts in a vessel, it finishes in a vessel. The writer, at the beginning, uses the big ship as a means to reach the deepest secrets of the North Sea, but at the end it is used as the last place that the main characters are going to meet in: "I am surrounded by mountains of ice which admit of no escape and threaten of every moment to crash my vessel" (*Frankenstein*, p.307). The role that Walton's ship is set for in *Frankenstein* is like a carrier of sinful people. In the Bible, the vessel is taken as a symbol for humility and mortality:

For every lofty tower and every fortified wall, for every trading ship and every tately vessel. The arrogance of all people will be brought low and human pride humbled; the Lord alone will be exalted in that day, and the idols will totally disappear. (Isaiah, 2: 15- 18)

3.2 Natural Aspects as Religious Symbols

One of the main points that the reader can notice while reading *Frankenstein* is how Shelley relates the changes in the main character's mood with the surrounding nature. The natural aspects serve as a mirror which reflects the deeper thoughts that the character has and as a mysterious reflection in the supernatural realm.

3.2.1 The Sea

At the very beginning of the story, Walton, the sailor, states in his first letter to his sister that he has a mission in the North Sea: "I accompanied the whale-fishers on several expeditions to the North Sea; I voluntarily endured cold, famine, thirst, and want of sleep." (*Frankenstein*, p.4). Because of this trip, the story of *Frankenstein* is revealed, and as it is described by the

Bible, the sea is the source of deep secrets: “He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.” (Micah, 7:19).

3.2.2 The Water

The unpleasant events that Frankenstein passed through cause a feeling of fear to grow inside him most of the time. As the author acquaints the character’s feelings with the surrounding nature, the quiet surrounding setting is set as a calming-down treatment:

I contemplated the lake: the waters were placid; all around was calm; and the snowy mountains, ‘the palace of nature’, were not changed. By degrees the calm and heavenly scene restored me, and I continued my journey towards Geneva. (*Frankenstein*, p.92)

Relating the view of the water to the feeling of comfort is seen from a religious perspective as a way to refer to safety. From a Christian stand, water is used to describe the peace that comes with the Holy Spirit: “Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.” (John, 7:38, 39).

3.2.3 The Wind

Mary Shelley’s novel ends with a sad event that the creator, Victor Frankenstein, passes away, and the creature vanishes from sight. The tragic ending which the author draws is predicted by the unpleasant weather change that leads the protagonist to his final setting on Walton’s ship: “The wind arose; the sea roared; and, as with the mighty shock of an earthquake, it split and cracked with a tremendous and overwhelming sound.” (*Frankenstein*, p.300). From the religious view, the wind is taken as a symbol for destruction as it is expressed in the Bible: “As for mortals, their days are like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.” (Psalms, 103: 15, 16).

4. Religious Symbols in *A Descent into the Maelstrom*

The 19th century religious reformation that America witnessed raised an interest for the religious aspect in its inhabitants’ life. In *A Descent into the Maelstrom* (ADIMS), Edgar Allan Poe gives an overview of the religious change and its effect on the American people; he includes a key expression at the beginning of the story, that is “The ways of God in nature” (ADIMS, line: 1). This expression is stated by a British clergyman Joseph Glanvill (16366-1680), and basing the story on it, it can be easy to relate the events of the story to the glory of God and His spiritual powers.

4.1 Objects as Religious Symbols

Throughout the short story, Poe uses many surrounding objects in order to give the setting a more vivid sense. The meanings of these objects, however, can be deeper when analysing them from a religious perspective.

4.1.1 The Island

An aspect that Poe uses in his story is symbolising the feeling of being lost that the people have in the island: “[...] there was visible a small, bleak-looking island; or, more properly, its position was discernible through the wilderness of surge in which was enveloped” (ADIMS, line: 43-44). In the Bible, the expression island is related to isolation and to nations without any belief:

Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust. [...] Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. (Isaiah, 40: 15-17)

4.1.2 The Tenth of July

Stating the exact day of the event that the old man is narrating gives the short story a more accurate sense: "It was the tenth of July 18--, a day which the people of this part of the world will never forget." (ADIMS, Line: 199). The reason, however, behind choosing the number 'ten' as a date for the event is that this number is a significance for the perfection from a Christian view: "At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food." (Daniel, 1:15).

4.1.3 The Wall

Through his short story, *A Descent into the Maelstrom*, Poe tends to give the angry waves, which are the result of the stormy winds, the characteristics of 'walls':

[...] from that circular rift amid the clouds which I have already described, steamed in a flood of golden glory along the black walls, and far away down into the inmost recesses of the abyss. (ADIMS, line: 351-352)

The way how the sailors' ship hangs in the middle of the standing waves is like a protection means in order not to go inside the whirl. The idea of using the walls as a symbol of protection is an old existing thought in religion, in which God provided his followers with the protection of walls from waters as a way to separate the believers from the unbelievers: "He divided the sea and led them through; he made the water stand up like a wall." (Psalms, 78: 13).

4.2 Natural Aspects as Religious Symbols

The main theme of Poe's story *A Descent into the Maelstrom* is the supernatural aspect of natural phenomena. Moving through the events of the story, the reader can notice how the narrator gives importance to the natural changes, which can be interpreted as a medium to achieve the metaphysical world.

4.2.1 The Whirl

The storm that the old man describes to the narrator turns to be worst with the appearance of the huge whirl near their boat: "The edge of the whirl was presented by a broad belt of gleaming spray." (ADIMS, line: 81). The sudden appearance of the whirl creates a deep feeling of fear and awe among the sailors, which represents the same feeling that the people of New World had when the religious changes took place in their churches. In the Bible, the whirl is related to the magnificent events that the earth can witness: "Your thunder was heard in the whirl wind, your lightening lit up the world; the earth trembled and quaked." (Psalms, 77:18). In Poe's story, the sudden explosion of the whirl is an unexpected change in the feeling that the nearby persons have.

4.2.2 The Thunder

The thunder creates a surprising shock and awakening: "[...] --for, however conclusive on paper, it becomes altogether unintelligible, and even absurd, amid the thunder of abyss." (ADIMS, line: 155). For the unaware people, the thunder in the Bible is used as a symbol for the presence of a higher supernatural power, the presence of God: "The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters." (Psalm, 29:3).

4.2.3 The Rainbow

After the surprising rise of the storm and its scary shifts from stability to unbelievable horror scenes, Poe draws a view of a rainbow to show that the weather is getting clear and becomes peaceful: "By degrees, the froth and the rainbow disappeared, and the bottom of the

gulf seemed slowly to uprise.” (*ADIMS*, line: 441). The rainbow is a symbol of God’s covenant and agreement on the current situation:

And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. (Genesis, 9: 12-13)

5. Religious Symbolism and the Religious State in *Frankenstein* and *A Descent into the Maelstrom*

The analysis of the used symbols in *Frankenstein* and *A Descent into the Maelstrom* revealed some similarities and some differences between the two writers’ societies. The detected meanings can be considered as a reflection of the religious changes and conflicts in the 18th and 19th centuries in Britain and America.

The symbols that both writers use in their works indicate the insignificance of human being before the religious reformation and the moral darkness. These symbols are a reflection of the British and the American life before the religious awakening that both lands witnessed during the 18th century. This darkness is described by the use of symbols as the dark, the island, the sea and the whirl. The previously-made analysis also presented symbols that show the British and the American religious reformations in 18th century and the beginning of 19th century; this reformation raised people’s awareness about religion and the presence of higher powers (Ryan, 2004). This change and the presence of God in the people’s life have been referred to by Shelley and Poe by using symbols as the while, the thunder and the storm.

The main difference between the two literary works is at their endings. The tragic ending in *Frankenstein* by the death of Victor Frankenstein and the disappearance of the wretch can be taken as a result of the way that the British used science as a way to reach higher levels. Mary Shelley uses symbols as the wind and the vessel as representatives of destruction. However, the ending of Poe’s *A Descent into the Maelstrom* is happy: even though the two brothers drowned, the narrator survives. Symbols such as the mist and the rainbow are used to indicate the protection and the peace that the Americans witnessed after their religious awakening.

6. Conclusion

The present paper aimed at analysing the use of symbolism in the two chosen literary works. It showed the importance of understanding symbolism in literature. Even though *Frankenstein* and *A Descent into the Maelstrom* are written by two different writers from different origins, the religious touch can be detected in both of them. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is studied by many critics for its scientific theme. Through considering the religious stand in Britain during the 18th and 19th centuries, the relationship between religion and science can be understood as a bridge to the supernatural realm. For Poe’s *A Descent into the Maelstrom*, the narrated events of the natural phenomena can be a reflection to the raised religious sense that the Americans had in the 19th century. These two literary works tackle the higher powers of the spiritual realm. Through considering the symbol as a literary device and as an indirect reference, this study was done to give an insight to the use of symbolism as an aesthetic addition to the literary text.

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