





QUIXOTIC IDEALISM AND MORAL DECAY IN MARY SHELLEY’S *FRANKENSTEIN*

MARY SHELLEY’NİN FRANKENSTEIN ROMANINDA DONKİŞOTVARI İDEALİZM VE
AHLAKİ ÇÜRÜME

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| <p> Received: 02.06.2021</p> <p> Accepted: 18.08.2021</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords: <i>Mary Shelley,</i> <i>Frankenstein,</i> <i>Quixotic Idealism,</i> <i>Moral Decay,</i> <i>Immanuel Kant.</i></p> <hr/> <p>Research Article</p> | <p>Mary Shelley’s <i>Frankenstein or the modern Prometheus</i> is one of the most celebrated novels of the 19th century and of speculative fiction. The novel represents a philosophical journey to the inner depths of the human experience. While the novel focuses on a variety of issues and themes, this study mainly deals with the notion of “Quixotism” and “Quixotic idealism” in <i>Frankenstein</i>. This article’s main purpose is to reveal, with specific references to the text, how Victor Frankenstein’s quixotic idealism destroys morality by engaging into immoral acts and eventually leading to his catastrophic downfall. In the theoretical framework, the notion of quixotism is elaborated with references to Cervantes’ timeless novel, <i>Don Quixote</i>. In addition to quixotism, Kantian morality is discussed with emphasis on the philosopher’s concept of “the categorical imperative”. To this end, the study compares Victor Frankenstein’s quixotism to Don Quixote’s and observing many resemblances, and it draws the conclusion that both are equivalent characters whose actions are void of moral concerns. Finally, the article aims to expose that irrationality and immorality are the consequences of quixotic idealism which result in disastrous consequences.</p> |
| MAKALE BİLGİSİ | ÖZET |
| <p> Geliş: 02.06.2021</p> <p> Kabul: 18.08.2021</p> <hr/> <p>Anahtar Kelimeler: <i>Mary Shelley,</i> <i>Frankenstein,</i> <i>Donkişotvari İdealizm,</i> <i>Ahlaki Çürüme,</i> <i>Immanuel Kant.</i></p> <hr/> <p>Araştırma Makalesi</p> | <p>Mary Shelley’nin <i>Frankenstein ya da Modern Prometheus</i> eseri 19. yüzyılın ve spekülasyonun en çok bilinen romanlarından biridir. Roman, insan deneyiminin derinliklerine doğru felsefi bir yolculuğu temsil etmektedir. Romanın çeşitli tema ve meselelerle odaklandığı halde, bu araştırma temel olarak <i>Frankenstein</i>’de Donkişotluk ve Donkişotvari idealizm kavramlarını ele almaktadır. Makalenin temel amacı, metne yapılan göndermelerle, Victor Frankenstein’in Donkişotvari idealizminin ahlak dışı eylemler aracılığıyla ahlaki nasıl ortadan kaldırdığını ve bunun karakterin çöküşüne yol açtığını açığa çıkarmaktır. Makalenin kuramsal çerçevesinde Donkişotluk kavramı, Cervantes’in zamana meydan okuyan romanı, <i>Don Kişot</i>’a yapılan referanslarla irdelenmektedir. <i>Don Kişot</i>’a ek olarak, Kant’ın ahlak anlayışı, düşünürün “koşulsuz buyruk” kavramına yapılan vurgu ile incelenmektedir. Bu bağlamda, araştırma Victor Frankenstein’in Donkişotluğunu Don Kişot figürü ile karşılaştırarak pek çok benzerlik gözlemekte ve eşdeğer karakterler olarak, her iki kişinin eylemlerinin ahlaki kaygılardan yoksun oldukları sonucuna varmaktadır. Sonuç olarak makale, irrasyonellik ve ahlak dışılığın, Donkişotvari idealizmin birer sonucu olduklarını ve bu sonucun felakete yol açtığını dışı vurmaktadır.</p> |

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Introduction

Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus (1818) by Mary Shelley forms one of the most influential and groundbreaking novels of the 19th century British fiction. The novel is considered to be the founding cornerstone of science fiction and speculative literature. Dealing with a variety of themes and issues, *Frankenstein* represents a philosophical journey to the deepest frontiers of the human experience. A variety of themes are explored in Shelley's canonical work of fiction. However, the most prevalent issue of *Frankenstein* is the notion of "Quixotism" which the whole plot structure of the novel is based on.

Quixotism is a notion which possesses a focal place in *Frankenstein*. This article aims to discuss quixotic idealism in contrast with morality. In a specific context, the study argues that quixotic idealism inevitably leads to the eradication of morality by providing particular references from the novel. In the theoretical section, the study draws a framework quixotism by referring to Miguel de Cervantes' legendary novel. Hence, a detailed analysis is carried out on the notion of quixotism, its depiction through the character of Don Quixote, its peculiar characteristics and its consequences. In addition, the next section maintains an analysis of Kantian morality in general and the categorical imperative in specific. Kantian morality and his system of universal law is elaborated with various specific examples. Finally, the article concludes by contemplating a detailed account of Victor Frankenstein's quixotic idealism and moral decadence which occurs as an outcome of his actions.

Quixotism and Quixotic Idealism

The term "Quixotism" is derived from Miguel de Cervantes' legendary 17th century novel *Don Quixote*. Briefly, the term indicates excessive idealism and romantic attachment to any particular cause or action. Moreover, Quixotism is defined as ardent idealism, or the seeking of an ideal that may or may not be achievable (Driggers 2011: 1). Quixotic idealism is a state of condition where fantasy and dreams are intertwined. In Cervantes' groundbreaking novel, the protagonist, Don Quixote is involved in a series of adventures with his friend Sancho Panza. The novel is described as: "*A delightful satire on the unreal world of knight-errantry*" (De Madariaga 1928: 97). Dealing with several themes such as chivalry and heroism, *Don Quixote* represents a voyage between fantasy and reality. He is a figure who excessively reads chivalry books and eventually gets carried away in them. The more he starts getting carried away, the more the line between his consciousness and fantasy is blurred and soon becomes immersed in the books he reads, transforming him into the character he admires deeply, a chivalrous knight. After his transformation, chivalry and knighthood become Don Quixote's new reality. He is now fully incorporated to the role of a brave, chivalrous knight who goes on missions to save his country. Along his so-called quest to "save his country," Quixote sees several visions and hallucinations (envisions windmills as enemy giants) that alter his perception of reality. Quixote's excessive idealism is of such a nature that causes him to lose all sense of connections with reality and ultimately leads to the creation of a new, imaginary "reality":

"Don Quixote must be painted with faith, above all with the faith that comes from a quixotic idealism, fount of all truly real creation, an idealism that in the end compels all Sanchos, no matter how little they like it, to follow along behind. Don Quixote must be

painted with the faith which creates the unseen, in the firm belief that Don Quixote exists and lives and acts, in the same way those marvellous "primitive" painters believed in the life of the saints and angels they painted" (Unamuno 1967: 303).

Quixote's idealism is so strong and passionate that he ends up losing his sense and understanding of reality. What leads to this result is Quixote's emotional attachment to the books of chivalry. Quixote's sentimental attachment to his ideals and his acceptance of the artificially constructed reality leads his companion, Sancho Panza to follow in his path. Thus, Quixote not only gets carried away by his own quixotic idealism but also drags Sancho Panza along with him. Panza, who represents reason and reality, the exact opposing values of Quixote, cannot help from getting involved in Quixote's world of "quixotic idealism."

The people who conform to the quixotic condition are called "Quixotes" (Gordon 2006: 1). To this end, Quixotism maintains a distinction between "us and them." Thus, the term quixotic signifies a condition that specifies "the other" (2006: 2). From this perspective, there occurs a distinction between the quixotes and the nonquixotes (2006: 5). The quixotes, as depicted in the original narrative of Cervantes four centuries ago, experience a purely imaginary and artificial reality which they easily take for granted. Furthermore, the condition of Quixotism obstructs the subject's connection with common sense, to such an extent that the irrational and even the absurd become a part of their artificially constructed reality. There is no doubt that the quixotes' vision and perception of reality is distorted in a dramatic sense and their vision of the objective reality is blurred to such an extent that they become wholly detached from rational and logical thinking.

After this specific phase, it becomes virtually impossible for the quixote to reverse this transformation and enact a return to the sphere of nonquixotes. According to Gordon, the structure of quixotism incorporates, "tendency to substitute the figments of his imagination for the real itself. The practice of quixotism involves *making* rather than *finding* the real" (2006: 13). Hence, Quixotism is an act of creating rather than finding or discovering. On the other hand, while it is very common and easy for nonquixotes to observe that their reality and vision is blurred, this is not the case for quixotes as they do not doubt their reality. To this end: "*The quixote encounters a world filled with objects and values, and this reality feels to the quixote precisely the way our reality feels to us*" (2006: 14). In addition, Oleksandr Pronkevych defines the act of quixotism as "a conflict between Dream and Reality in the human mind" (2016: 189). Furthermore, she argues that romantic authors have transformed Don Quixote into a myth: "Don Quixote, the hero, is a myth-figure; as such he is free to be re-interpreted — i. e. re-created — by posterity; the truth of the myth — like the truth of any historic event or person — is its ideal residue in the minds of those who re-live it (Close 1978: 148).

Thus, the quixotic hero is a myth created and endorsed by the romantic literary movement. He/she is the construct of an ideal image established in the minds of all humans who relive the same experience. To this end, Suzanne LaLonde contemplates that the character's quixotic condition, or madness as she asserts, is a form of therapy which she argues to incorporate stages of sentimental illogicalness (2017: 246). Thus, reading chivalrous books not only provide a means of escape for Quijano but also successfully manage to fill in important gaps that persist in his life. Quijano's reading is excessive as he gets obsessed with them and with their

characters. Hence, his becoming Quixote from Quijano marks his metamorphosis through reading (LaLonde 2017: 249). Lastly, Paul J. Schmidt contends that the dualistic origin of Quijano/Quixote's character is connected to his state of being "sanely insane" where he preserves his sanity underneath the guise (2017: ii). As a result, quixotic idealism is a state of mind which annihilates rationalism and also causes a moral decay. Therefore, quixotism establishes a binary opposition with morality.

Kantian Morality and the Categorical Imperative

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was a philosopher of the enlightenment who exerted a profound impact on western philosophy and society in general. Kant was deeply affected by religion and this was displayed in his belief in the existence of God, the dignity of humanity and the need for a universal system of morality (Sullivan 1994: 7). As a person devoted to the ideals of the Enlightenment, Kant purported that: "*There can only be one ground for the Universal Principle of Justice: the authority of reason alone, as evidenced in the moral thinking of ordinary people*" (1994: 12-13). Human beings are dependent on moral duties and must therefore have an accurate acknowledgment of morality and its values (1994: 13). Due to this reasoning, Kant developed his "Deontological Ethics" which aimed at establishing a universally acceptable and just system of morality. Kant's deontological system differed structurally from the earlier consequentialist system:

"Consequentialism holds that an act is morally permissible if and only if it has the best overall consequences. Deontology rejects this simple account of right and wrong, insisting that certain acts are morally forbidden, even when they would lead to better results overall. Deontologists thus embrace constraints—prohibitions against performing the offensive types of acts, even when doing so would lead to better results" (Kant and Schneewind 2002: 142).

Thus, consequentialism mainly relies on the results of the action and judges the particular action based upon its results. On the other hand, Kantian deontology posits that actions alone ought to be evaluated as these need to be judged on their moral value and strictly argues against the understanding that consequences ought to be considered along with the action. Various examples could be provided in relation to this difference but as a basic example, the torture of criminal suspects can be given. According to consequentialism, the torture of criminal, even terrorist suspects can be justified because as a result of their torture, vital information could be attained which could in its turn save many other human lives, or provide other significant advantages related to the case. The consequentialists thereby ascribe more value to the result of the action rather than the action itself. From a Kantian deontological perspective, however, it would be argued that torture, whatever its form may be, is morally wrong and completely unacceptable. Thus, disregarding its potential results, deontology would firmly reject such an action due to its immoral nature.

Closely formulated within the context of deontological ethics lies Kant's notion of "The Categorical Imperative." Mentioned for the first time in his famous *Groundwork for Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), the categorical imperative was put forward in order to establish "a probable, supreme moral principle" (Thomas E. Hill 2009: 3). Kant describes the categorical imperative through the following words: "*Act only in accordance with that maxim through*

which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (Kant and Schneewind 2002: 37). Kant's statement stresses the significance of the universal quality of the given action. In other words, any given action should be evaluated so that it would be considered moral in universal terms. To give an example: "You should not kill or torture people for profit or amusement. These principles seem to express constraints that do not depend on whether your conforming to them will serve your particular ends or make you happy" (Thomas E. Hill 2009: 6). Hence, Kant's categorical imperative acts independently from consequentialist reasoning and focuses solely on the action itself, disregarding all its possible outcomes. Kant declares that "it is *rationally necessary* for us to presuppose that moral imperatives are really supported by a valid Categorical Imperative" (2009: 6). Thus, according to Kant's reasoning, an action's morality can be justified only if it conforms to a valid categorical imperative. Kant's following expression of the categorical imperative purported that: "*Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in any other person, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means*" (Kant and Schneewind 2002: 47). This second version of Kant's formulation highlights that his philosophy strictly opposes consequentialism and the consideration of the results in any given action. In Kant's words, people ought to treat others as they mean to treat them, not for the consequences of their actions. By expressing this, Kant shuts the doors to expedience and relationships based on interests.

According to Kantian scholar, Alan Montefiore, the categorical imperative is: "*An imperative that applies at all times and in all places to everyone, irrespective of their own particular circumstances*" (2003: 77). Thus, the imperative is independent from external factors. He maintains that only those actions whose objective or end is determined by one's own free will may adhere to the views of moral judgement (Montefiore 2003: 79). Thus, the philosopher ascribes meaning to the concept of free will. Another remarkable statement is that virtue may be perceived as the potential to become happy and that virtue and happiness together form the "summum bonum" (the highest good) (2003: 81). Thus, Kant goes one step further to associate the concept of happiness with his understanding of morality. According to the thinker, virtue and happiness combined can lead to the greatest good.

In addition, Scottish philosopher Herbert James Paton (1887-1969) contends that Kant's moral philosophy completely excludes consequences "*because an action will have certain consequences which he desires, therefore he will regard the action as his duty. He knows that it may be his duty not to produce results which he may greatly desire*" (1971: 76). Kant defends that the consequence of any action cannot be a criterion of evaluation if it is to contain morality. To put it differently, people should never allow their desires for specific consequences determine their judgments (1971: 76). Thus, any kind of judgment should not be based on our desires to achieve certain consequences or to obtain other objectives. Kant also emphasises the importance of good will in human beings:

"In obeying law for its own sake a good man is raised above the stream of events which we call nature: he is no longer at the mercy of his own natural instincts and desires. A good man is free in so far as he obeys the formal law which is the product of his rational will instead of being pulled about by desire, and it is this freedom which arouses Kant's veneration" (Paton 1971: 77).

All in all, Kant's categorical imperative was an attempt to maintain a universal system of morality based on the priority of the action rather than other constituents. Quixotic idealism and morality are binary oppositions which share an antithetic position towards one another. Irrationality and passionate attachment to a cause abolish the necessity for moral concerns. The relationship between quixotism and morality is the argument of discussion which deserves further scrutiny in the upcoming part of this article.

From Quixotism towards Moral Decay in *Frankenstein*

A central theme of Shelley's narrative is quixotic idealism which eventually distorts and annihilates morality. Published some two hundred years after *Don Quixote*, *Frankenstein* displays strong indications related to quixotism. Shelley's protagonist, Victor Frankenstein is a quixotic character as he demonstrates significant signs of this state of mind. He is a quixote living amongst non-quixotes. Dr. Victor Frankenstein exhibits signs of excessive emotional attachment towards scientific practices. His overtly romantic and extreme commitment to natural sciences is equivalent to Quixote's sentimental attachment to books of chivalry. It is later revealed that the origin of Victor's interest and later, his obsession in science goes back to his childhood:

"My father had taken the pains to explain to me that the principles of Agrippa had been entirely exploded, and that a modern system of science had been introduced, which possessed much greater powers than the ancient, because the powers of the latter were chimerical, while those of the former were real and practical [...] and I continued to read with the greatest avidity" (Shelley 2019: 33).

Victor is informed by his father that a new, modern system of science is developed which conveys great abilities to the ones who master it. Victor, fascinated by this news, delves into this innovative, advanced practice of science and begins reading books with utmost enthusiasm. Soon, he becomes obsessed with the scientific knowledge he acquires from the books. Victor's reading of scientific books is akin to Quixote's reading books of chivalry. Both characters become so carried away in reading the books that they gradually begin to lose their sense of reality and in their minds become a mere subject of their quixotic idealism and desires. For example, Victor states: *"I read and studied the wild fancies of these writers with delight; they appeared to me treasures known to few beside myself"* (Shelley 2019: 33). For both characters reading these works is an act of self-satisfaction which gradually blurs their sense of reality and rationality. As a consequence, both Victor and Quijano experience a transformation that turns them into quixotes. Their surrender to quixotic idealism leads them to cross the line to the domain of the others, the irrationals, the subjectives etc. in stark contrast to all other characters who are in turn defined as non-quixotes. After this phase, their common sense and connection with the reality gets distorted. Other characters such as Henry Clerval and Robert Walton are non-quixotes just like Sancho Panzo who also exhibits non-quixotic features of realism and rationalism. However, Panzo cannot help getting involved in Quixote's whereabouts. Victor and Quijano's detachment from the reality occurs in different manners as both personalities become involved in disparate practices. Victor's scientific books and Quijano's books of chivalry enable both characters to perform the transition to the domain of quixotic idealism.

Quijano's and Victor's quixotic idealism eventually leads to several disastrous consequences. Quijano's excessive attachment to the books of chivalry turns him into a knight-errand whereas Victor's romantic involvement in the natural sciences transforms him into a failed scientist who gives life to create a hideous monster. Both quixotes engage in absurd actions which eventually result in sheer catastrophe and finally death. Victor assembles body parts so as to create a living being from a dead corpse. Victor acts like a God because of his quixotic idealism. Due to his extreme romantic attachment to the ideals of natural sciences, Victor convinces himself that he is perfectly able to fulfil his dreams to bestow life upon lifeless forms:

"I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time traversing my bedchamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep" (Shelley 2019: 54).

Victor's quixotic desire blurs his interaction with the reality before he engages in this act. On the other hand, after he completes the task and beholds the result, he is immensely struck by the power of pure reality. Victor suddenly comes to the realisation that he had been blinded by quixotic idealism, leading him to the creation of a living creature which he, himself cannot stand. Upon this shock, he suddenly leaves the creature and flees the location. Both Quixote and Victor experience a process of creating an illusionary perception which replaces the objective reality. As a result of this illusionary perception, Victor becomes a victim of his quixotism and drags his friends along, in a similar manner to Quixote. The creature created by Victor kills Henry Clerval and Elizabeth Lavenza and causes the deaths of other characters as well. While the conflict between illusion and reality is blurred at the beginning, the objective reality prevails in the end. Finally, both Victor and Quixote end up losing their lives as a consequence of their quixotic idealism.

Moreover, quixotism exhibits a binary opposition with morality. In other words, from a Kantian perspective, quixotic idealism annihilates all moral concerns. According to Kantian morality, for any action to be considered moral, it needs to become an end not a means. Victor's ambition of giving life to assembled body parts is a selfish act of self-satisfaction. This action does not possess any rational or moral purpose but to satisfy Victor's ego and to show the world what an amazing scientist he actually is. From a consequentialist window, it could be discussed that if Victor had been successful, he could have made a breakthrough in the natural sciences. Nevertheless, from a deontological window, giving life to assembled body parts from corpses is the subject matter that needs to be the sole focal point in terms of morality. From the window of the categorical imperative, Victor's act cannot be justified morally because it lacks rationality, good will and is not executed for the "highest good." Victor creates the monster not for the sake of science or humanity but simply for his own sake. Therefore, the creation of the creature is not a moral act but rather an immoral act of quixotic idealism. The creation of the creature is based on Victor's personal desires/ambitions which eliminate all moral concerns. In addition, from a Kantian perspective, for an act to be moral, the act itself ought to be considered

and nothing else. Hence, what morality lies in the assembling of body parts from a dead corpse and bestowing life upon it? As it can be argued from different viewpoints, Victor's act is an attempt to assume the role of God through science. To put it in another way, it represents the abuse of science and scientific development for personal gain. Victor uses science to alter the course of nature and to assume the role of supreme creator, the giver of life. Thus, quixotism is a major factor that eliminates morality. Victor openly reveals his quixotic intentions and desires on several occasions: "*Pursuing these reflections, I thought, that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption*" (Shelley 2019: 49).

All in all, Victor's act incorporates no sense of morality as his ultimate intention is to become a supreme creator, a God-like figure who takes pleasure and satisfaction in giving life to soulless matter. Once successful, Victor believes he will be the one who will be worshipped and this absurd desire forms his major driving force. In the subtext of the novel, it can be inferred that Victor's intentions are in essence evil and void of morality. His lack of good-will and consideration of the highest good demonstrate that quixotism eventually does away with morality.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* exposes a binary opposition of quixotism vs. morality. In particular terms, it has been established that Victor Frankenstein's quixotic idealism causes him to get engaged in a highly immoral act which eventually turns into a terrible catastrophe. In addition, from a Kantian perspective, Victor's quixotic act of giving life to body parts from a dead corpse cannot share a moral responsibility due to the fact that the protagonist's major motivation lies in self-satisfaction rather than scientific progress and/or a humanist purpose.

Furthermore, it has also been determined that Victor Frankenstein exhibits characteristics related to a quixote, in equivalent manner to Miguel de Cervantes' timeless personality of Don Quixote. Thus, both Victor and Quixote have been identified as quixotes who fall victim to their quixotic idealism and engage in immoral acts which ultimately cause their tragic downfall. Both of these protagonists have been presented in contrast to other characters that are defined as non-quixotes but nonetheless who cannot stop the protagonists from committing immoral acts and ending up with disastrous consequences. All in all, it has been deduced that quixotism and quixotic idealism eradicates morality and eliminates all moral concerns to result in uncontrollable, catastrophic consequences as demonstrated with specific references from the above mentioned texts.

Ethical Statement

According to the author's statement, scientific, ethical and quotation rules were followed in the writing process of the study named "Quixotic Idealism and Moral Decay in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*"; according to ULAKBİM TR DİZİN criteria, there was no need for data collection in the study requiring ethics committee approval.

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