

ENGLISH ADVANCED: *FRANKENSTEIN* / *BLADE RUNNER*

Context can be defined as the circumstances that form the setting of an event or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood. While the contexts of *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner* are separated by time, a comparative study reveals the similarities between the distinctive societies that form each story's context. The film *Blade Runner* therefore re-engages the issues raised in the novel *Frankenstein* in a new context and an altered textual form, which brings to light the aspects that make each context so unique, yet so similar. Shelley's work combines Romantic ideas of creative arrogance, imagination and the immoral nature of industrialisation, with macabre Gothic settings and sinister themes. Scott takes inspiration from issues of globalisation, environmental degradation and the rise of technology facing 1980s society, to create his dystopia in which the concept of humanity is similarly challenged.

Studying *Frankenstein* in conjunction with *Blade Runner* accentuates the distinctive nature of each context: both texts were composed during turbulent times of change. *Frankenstein* was first published in 1818, a historical period characterised by change, revolution and immense suffering caused by rapid industrialisation. Science probed into life's mysteries, revealing only more uncertainty in discovering how little was known about humanity, as voiced through the creature's cry in *Frankenstein*, "And what was I? Of my creation and my creator I was absolutely ignorant." *Blade Runner* was released during the technological rise of the 1980s, and provides a similar critique on society due to these parallels in context. The resonant motif of slavery features in both texts, to create bondage between characters. The creature exercises power over Victor, "You are my creator, but I am your master, obey!" but later realises, "I was the slave, not the master, of an impulse which I detested but could not disobey." This voices the concern of traditional feudal peasants becoming slaves to factories, machines and coalmines due to the dramatic upheaval of English society following rapid industrialisation. In *Blade Runner*, Roy says to Deckard, "Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave." This challenges the existence of replicants, who were created to be slaves yet display real desires and emotions. Replicant Rachel blatantly points out the way in which she has been commodified: "I'm not in the business. I am the business."

The simultaneous study of *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner* accentuates the similar fears emerging in each society of the double-edged nature of scientific progress. Scott conveys the concerns of the new digital age by paradoxically marking its end, in his dystopic vision of the future. This world contains no natural elements, except for the destructive and relentless fire and rain in the opening bird's eye shot, foreshadowed by the eerie, foreboding music accompanying the opening credits. Roy invokes and subverses William Blake's revolutionary Poem, "America, A Prophecy", misquoting, "Fiery the angels fell" instead of the original "Fiery the angels rose" to suggest a less fortunate fate for the world than Blake's optimistic vision. All humans left on the depository planet of earth are deficient; Sebastian has a condition that causes him to age too rapidly, and Gaff has a limp. This parade of broken humans juxtaposed against the superior replicants creates irony; replicant Pris philosophically proves her existence by saying, "I think, therefore I am," and then plunges her hand into boiling water to retrieve an egg, proving her contrasting artificiality. She then tosses this egg to Sebastian, who as a human cannot touch the hot surface. This illustrates the concern of technology surpassing humanity, a notion further expressed by replicants' 'expiry date', to ensure they do not live longer than four years. It begs the questions: what constitutes humanity? What makes the authentic superior to the simulacrum?

Both texts use doubling in the bond between creation and creator to voice their concern for society's degradation at human hands. *Frankenstein*'s nameless creature symbolises the violence that erupts where language fails to control by defining or making meaning, a Gothic horror that is only highlighted by the fractured form of the text itself. The recurrence of images such as ice give the novel a circular, claustrophobic feel, while the symmetrical sequence of narrators, means every value is tested by the central story of the creature. He is a tangible product of society's

mistreatment, his capacity for violence a result of social exile and an estrangement from nature: “I am malicious because I am miserable.” The creature induces sympathy: “the fallen angel becomes the malignant devil.” Victor’s contrasting, egocentric fixation on personal suffering limits audience empathy; the narrative is driven by his self-destructive desire to be unified with his ‘other self’. The projection of Victor’s characteristics onto the creature is obvious: both wander the earth confusedly like evil spirits, suffering terrible pangs of remorse, and both are absorbed by their passion for knowledge. However the authenticity of Victor’s penitence is questioned by his contrasting statements: “for the guilty there is no peace”/ “I have been... examining my past conduct, nor do I find it blameable.” While the creature’s isolation is a product of human cruelty as a result of his physical monstrosity, a resonant motif from the moment his “dull yellow eye” opens, Victor’s obsession to create life ostracises him: “Solitude was my only consolation...” The mirroring relationship between Roy and Deckard in *Blade Runner* also tangibly represents concerns of human morality in Scott’s society. Each is the negative reflection of the other; physically, Roy has light skin and hair, while Deckard has darker features. Doubling is most evident in the scene leading up to Roy’s death, which features blatant mirror images: both are bleeding, crying, and have an injured hand. However, Roy is presented as Deckard’s ‘superior self’, as he makes the jump across the building while Deckard does not; the nail in his hand likens him to Christ with religious imagery. He also accepts death, unlike Deckard, as shown by the famous quote, “Time... to die”, as well as Roy’s miraculous release of the dove upon his death, which can be interpreted as the release of his soul.

Another significant feature of the historical periods surrounding *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner* is the domination of science and objective thinking over religion. Imagination had been subservient to reason during the post-enlightenment period that preceded Romanticism, the movement that valued passion and wondrous journeys, and evidently influenced Shelley’s writing in her elaborate descriptions of nature. *Frankenstein* features sensory natural imagery such as, “the winds were hushed, and all nature reposed under the eye of the quiet moon” and alliteration in lines such as “deep, dark, deathlike solitude” which give Romanticist elements symbolic resonance. The novel also features prominent Gothic themes such as vengeance: Victor says upon abandoning his creation, “I ardently wished to extinguish that life which I had so thoughtlessly bestowed.” Sinister themes are characteristic of Gothicism, a literary style characterised by the grotesque, mysterious, desolate and the supernatural that was particularly popular in the late 18th century as it allowed the reader an escape from the new, ordered, logical world, akin to the modern fantasy genre that evidently inspired the imaginative world of *Blade Runner*.

Blade Runner reflects concerns of post-modernism, a distinct parallel to Romanticism in Shelley’s time. While Ronald Reagan was a conservative and highly religious leader during the 1980’s, similar to the post-enlightenment era preceding the birth of *Frankenstein*, *Blade Runner* takes influence from the contrasting radical, post-modern movement that in essence stated that there is no absolute truth. Scott overwhelms his audience with layering of confusing images: huge billboards with Asian faces represent commercial exploitation and the domination of Asian economies. Tyrell is the only God figure, as shown by his residence at the top of a pyramid – the importance of being high is emphasised by the ethereal music that plays as Deckard rises in his hovercraft. Religion in both texts is only evidenced in religious imagery, which ironically challenges the existence of God. The religious symbolism in the creature’s cry, “I, like the arch fiend, bore a hell within me”, illustrates the extent of his animosity. God does not intervene in either text, and characters are left on a finite material stage. Societal concerns of man acting as God are represented within each text, through the creator characters who allude to Prometheus. Victor and Tyrell each view the future of mankind as heightened through knowledge; just like the ancient Greek God, it is in fact knowledge that leads to the destruction of these ‘modern Prometheus’s’; however, the intentions of Victor and Tyrell are far more egocentric.

A comparative study of *Frankenstein* and *Blade Runner* accentuates the fact that these texts share countless parallels in the themes they explore, due to the distinct similarities in context. The creature in Shelley’s novel acts as a scapegoat for societal monstrosity, who forever remains a

“demonical corpse, too horrible for human eyes to behold.” Shelley combines Romanticist and Gothic elements with science, to give credibility to the critique of 18th century society that is Frankenstein. Blade Runner similarly challenges the concept of humanity, through the doubling in the creation versus the creator, and features post-modern elements to challenge economic rationalists such as Reagan. These two very different texts, one an epistolary novel and the other a 1980s sci-fi film, are bound by the elements of society that inspire them. The piercing musical accompaniment of Blade Runner’s opening credits echoes the Promethean warning in Frankenstein’s by-line: both foreshadow a devastating ending in typical post-modern fashion. The audience is therefore not fascinated by the suspense of each story, but by the journey of characters that embody their composers’ struggles within an advancing, yet stifling, society.