

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

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### **Abstract**

The aims of this study is 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: Obsession, Aesthetic, Ethic, Religious

### **Introduction**

Literature has unlimited meanings. It can be globally defined as written work which is created aesthetically which contains an exact sense of the word. Literary work is written works which are imaginative and distinguished by either the intentions or the aesthetic or artistic side of the authors to make it different with other daily readings. Therefore, many people think that literary works just an imaginative word that explosively expressed (Leszl, 2006). Whereas, actually literary works is not just an imaginative word that exist but also there are some aesthetic perspective from real human life which represent inside the character or the plot of the story.

Literary work as the product of author's thought grows faster nowadays. It has developed around the world. The existence of literary work can be seen in every part of the world. The existence of literary works or literature itself, combine a factual

writing and a lot of fiction (Aras, 2015). Human tend to be exist in his own way. Every human has his own human rights to do something to show his existence. Even in literary work, there are characters which lead the think about Existentialism. Existentialism is a philosophy of living life as an active, aware, and authentic individual as an effort to look for the truth subjectivity (Solomon, 2004). The condition of how human life usually has a close relation with his obsession to show his existentialism. In *psychoanalysis* 1925, Sigmund Freud states that obsessional syndrome is a mad disease when human do not really pay attention to his nonsensical practices and human tend to bring himself to believe that what he want is actually right.

Obsession as existentialism happen when human trying really hard to show his willing to everyone and that what he think is right. Here, in *Frankenstein* novel. In order to showing his existentialism, obsession is the main cause which makes his life process change. And his character become someone different from what he used to be before.

In general, Existentialism focuses on concrete experience, but the experience has various meanings. Some of existentialist figures show that experience could come from many ways. There are four figures in existentialism, such as Soren Kierkegaard (religious existentialism), Jean Paul – Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche (will to power), Albert Camus (absurdist existentialism). In this case, the issues to be discussed will be using religious existentialism from Soren Kierkegaard. Existentialism not only conceives man himself to be but also he is what he will and he should renew himself after he exist (Stumpf & Fieser, 2012). Soren Kierkegaard who has been known as the founding father of existentialism states that there are three stages on human life's ways, those are aesthetic, ethical and religious (Solomon, 2004). In Literary work, Existentialism can be found on the character's experience.

Based on the explanation above and to explain how existentialism theory works on literary work, therefore this analysis would analyze a novel *Frankenstein* by Marry Shelley which will focus on the main character Victor Frankenstein, an ambitious man who want to create a creature with his knowledge (Shelley, 1818). as the existentialism theory, this analysis will apply the theory of existentialism stages by Soren Kierkegaard which contains of Aesthetic, Ethic and Religious as the main theory and New Criticism as the supporting theory. Soren Kierkegaard was the founding father of existentialism believes that there is no moral standard which limit oneself to be a being, faith is an important basis for making choices, because only on the basis of faith does an individual have a chance to become a true self (Solomon, 2004). Kierkegaard argues that there are three stages on the way how human's life. Those are aesthetic, ethics, and religious.

*Frankenstein* is Marry Shelley's most famous novel. Marry Shelley is classic novelist who was born on 1797. Original *Frankenstein* novel is a novel about an obsessed scientist named Victor Frankenstein who has a big obsession to combine his

knowledge of science and supernatural side of life in order to discover a new walking dead creature. His obsession leads him to meet the creature which he called as a 'monster'. After all made and set, Victor suddenly feels afraid of his new discovery. He leave that 'monster' in a hidden part of his apartment with his fear about the physical appearance of the monster even Victor getting sick of thinking about the monster. Unfortunately, the monster woken up and experienced some bad moment in society by his bad appearance and it is because Victor creates him like that.

The main issue of this analysis focuses on how the obsession of Victor Frankenstein will lead him into his life process. And that life process of Victor Frankenstein will help to show his existentialism which is in this analysis, it is portrayed by using Soren kierkegaard's existentialism that contain of three stages (Ethical, Aesthetical, and Religious).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Existentialism**

Existentialism is defined in contemporary philosophy. Literature existentialism definitely has a close relation toward the context of literature and philosophy (Endraswara, 2006). Existentialism is a part of philosophy which is focused on the existence of somebody or something. Existentialism was first introduced by Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Soren Aabey Kierkegaard is well known as the father of existentialism in the history of western philosophy (Raharjo, 2018). However, there are some various figures of existentialism such as Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jasper, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. They are all included as the great philosophers.

As a father of existentialism, Kierkegaard opinion about existentialism influences numerous writers and thinkers. Soren Kierkegaard's existentialism is also known as Religious Existentialism. As a religious man, actually Kierkegaard philosophy appeared as a reaction of Hegel's opinion which is described human as a passive creature, passive observer and just have a role as movie goer. Hegel's paradigm can influence an individual not to be responsible on his/her action because they enjoy with their crowd only. Kierkegaard strongly opposed it. Therefore to change Hegel's view, Kierkegaard made up with his own existentialism theory which focuses on individual experience. According to kierkegaard, there are three stages of human existence; they are aesthetic stages, ethic stages and religious stages.

### **Aesthetic Stages**

Aesthetic is a stages about the aesthetic of person lives for the moment. They have no deep commitments to one thing or another. They're not totally impulsive, but will only pursue long term goals as long as they're appealing, and will drop them once they are bored or something more fun appears on the horizon. They see life in terms of possibilities to be considered and enjoyed, not in terms of projects to pursue or ideals to live out. The aesthetic person is basically passive, and seeks satisfaction in things over which they have no control, dependent on what happens externally.

Kierkegaard states that sometimes, although not always, human action cannot be causally explained. It caused that human action is not based on rational merely, but also based on free choices and spontaneous emotional. Aesthetic included as human spontaneous emotional because in aesthetic, human tend to think about their current emotional feeling. It means that in aesthetic stages, human emotion is not stabilized yet. In this aesthetic stages, human only consider about the aesthetic aspect of his life. Human only consider about their pleasure. Aesthetic man is controlled by sex's instinct, pleasure hedonism principle, and act based on their mood.

Aesthetic stages show the authentic manner which is marked by degradation of manner (Wirahadi, 2008). They do not have any universal moral standard and specific religious beliefs which hold on their life due it will be limit humans freedom and choice (Stumpf & Fieser, 2012). Therefore, in this phase of aesthetic, human described as negative human nature more than positive human nature. It is normal as a human being to have their own negative phase of their life since we know that if human does not have their own certain, they will fall into other people certain. Thus, in aesthetic stages, human has a strong will to enjoy his entire experiences of emotional and desires.

Victor Frankenstein is a genius man of science, it is normal if he wants to create his own scientific product which is similar with human as God's creature. He cannot accept the general fact that human cannot create human. He denies everyone else opinion which says that scientific knowledge is not enough to make a creature which is similar to human being.

Furthermore, if human only influences by his aesthetic emotion then where is his soul going? His soul will go in despair. Human that only influences by his emotion, does not understand his orientation and his real goals of living. Then, there will only two choices, whether he would like to stay in his aesthetic stages by end up his life or he would like to move to other stage of life which is call as ethic stage. According to Kierkegaard, human being has to choose either they has to live aesthetically or they has to live ethically, or across it into religious stage (Kierkegaard, 2006)

### **Ethic Stages**

The second stage is ethic stages. In aesthetic, human tend to be influenced by his pleasure and his own taste, in ethical stage human starting to realize the rules and

conduct the reason formulates (Stumpf & Fieser, 2012). According to the standard reception, Kierkegaard presents the ethicist as a representative of this important insight into human existence.

Ethical is the next stage which focused on 'choosing oneself' the ethical person sees themselves as a goal, and where the aesthetic is constantly concerned with external things, the ethical person directs their attention and efforts towards their own nature, being something over which they have control. They examine themselves to discover what they really want, and what's important isn't so much whether they achieve the things they set out to achieve, but more the extent to which they throw their whole selves into their activities (Roth, 2003).

Objective thinking is relevant and appropriate when it comes to areas as logic, nature, mathematics and history, because such areas of scientific research is ruled by a certain necessity that makes it possible to achieve knowledge unrelated to particular subjects. In ethical phase, human can control his emotion and can adjust it with universal morality standard. Hence, ethic human does not live for him, but he can follow the humanistic values.

Kierkegaard says that the movement of human from aesthetic to ethical phase is like who left their temporal sexual desire and come into marriage with all its duties. In his book *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard also explain that the ethical stage form of life is conceived as a stage superior to the esthetical one. it is only when human reach the ethical stage that we choose our own self, our true or absolute self. Absolute choice means choosing one's absolute self or choosing one's self according to its absolute value.

### **Religious stage**

The last stages and the highest stages of human existentialism mentioned by Kierkegaard is religious stage. Here, human starting to realize the reality of God. This is a phase where human carry on his authentically and face God as a single entity. The ethical and the religious are distinguished from each other because of their different understanding of how to conceive the pursuit of the good for its own sake (Klarer, 2004).

Religious mean does not influenced by a single humanity values. Religious phase is distinguished by recognition of human towards the existence of God. According to Kierkegaard, he illustrate the character modeling of religious man was Abraham. He is a figure from Holy Scripture. He sacrificed his son because he believes what God instructed to him. If human think rationally, what Abraham did here is irrational and out of humanity values. But according to religious man thinking, if Abraham did not obey God's instruction, Abraham would be sinful. Hence, Abraham thought out of

humanity principle he entered a paradox. Here, Abraham left his ethical phase to the religious phase.

There will be two kinds of paradox which religious man will face. The first is *paradoxical* of God. To explain this paradox, there is no rationally explanation. For example, if God is very good but why there are a crime and crime victims in this world? There is no way to get knowledge about it except through individual faith. To receive this kind of God's paradox, religious man should have his own subjectivity-believe based on his true faith of God (Abidin, 2006). The second paradox is anxiety. Anxiety has a different meaning with frightened, anxiety refers to unreal something, uncertain thing, and incoherent. Therefore, religious man believe that people supposed to living in God to escape from the anxiety (Wirahadi, 2008)

Therefore, only people who have his true faith and self-belief toward God will be survive in this phase of Religious Stage. Only the good one will survive and keep himself into the highest stage of existentialism.

## **Methodology**

This research use library based research such as reading the other reference, reading the book about related theory and understanding the whole content of the novel. This study use qualitative descriptive method and existentialism theory and taken by this following steps Reading the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, Understanding the important content inside the novel, Collecting the evidence based on the issue, Classifying the evidence which is included as the answer of the issue, Dividing the data in some stages (aesthetics, ethics and religious), Concluding result of the analysis. The source of the study will contain of Frankenstein novel, some of literary theory books, and some thesis as a reference. As an additional, the source of the study needs a biography of the writer, therefore an online biography website is needed as a source.

## **Discussion**

Based on the existentialism theory by Soren Kierkegaard in previous chapter, Kierkegaard divided Existentialism into three phases that is *Aesthetical stages*, *Ethical stages*, and the higher phases is Existentialism is *Religious stages*. Kierkegaard defined that human in existentialism have those three of phases to gain his existence.

## **Aesthetical Stage**

Aesthetical stage is where human feel boredom as the root of evil (Roth, 2003). Basically, human wants to show his existentialism to avoid that boredom which happens in his life. To avoid that boredom, of course human need to experiences new stages of his life which is lead it into the feeling of power and over confidence. As it shows inside the novel through the life of Victor Frankenstein, Frankenstein in a genius man who is currently studying science. He thought that he is understand the concept of creating human through science. Most of Aesthetic side of Victor will be concern on his Science ambition. And his interest of science begins when he was thirteen. He found some interesting aspect because of Cornelius Agrippa's book.

After finding the scientist work of Cornelius Agrippa, Victor becomes more interest to science. It leads his obsession grow bigger. Victor's father already stated that Victor should not waste a time to read Agrippa's science. But his father only explains that point without further explanation about Agrippa's theory. It makes Victor more and more curious about science. And it leads him into a big ambition which comes as the result of his boredom and his thinking which is only lead by his emotion without thinking that it would destroy him later. Not only about science. Victor thought that science is not enough. Yet, all his writer whom Victor believes is also talking about supernatural element because they are all the ancient writers. Thus, Victor tried to wider his knowledge into supernatural knowledge that is talked about ghost and spirit. He does not know that is not good to read about this without anyone to guide him.

After meeting the professor from his university, Victor starts to interest in chemistry which has a big role in science. He was starting to read science book over and over again. And asking to his professor about what he does not know. His interest over science became an obsession. He feels like he knows every construction of human being over science. He wants to create a creature which is similar with human because he feels he can do that with all the knowledge he already learned in his whole life.

Victor's ambition of making a creature grow bigger, he even cannot sleep at night, think about the next day he will making something. Shortly, after a while of thinking, Victor started to dong his imagination. He started to doing an observation, investigation over something which related to what he want to do. He starting to get impresses with some kind of supernatural horrors. He analyse everything like making a creature is the only aim of his life.

At this stage, Victor ambition changes himself become someone with a different personality. He does not think about his surrounding anymore. Not only about his surrounding, Victor seems like a man who did not care about his health. He only thinks about how to make his experiment success.

This stages keep continue until Victor faces something which he did not hope before, which he cannot even figure out before. He saw that his experiment did not work as what he thought. His experiment result did not please him. It happened

eventually after some progress he made but he still can't get what he imagine at first. Victor feels defeated like he has make something wrong. He feels like his dream is shattered and nothing can do with it anymore. Victor has being stress and sick because of that monster appearance. Victor even can back to the place where he makes that creature. The appearance of the creature is look like monster. And it makes Victor suffer a lot from fear. And because of this, Victor Aesthetical stages ended here and continue into the next stage which is ethical stages

### **Ethical Stages**

Kierkegaard described an ethical stages 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 Stage**

Religious stage is the highest stage of human existentialism. At this stage, human shows his deepest core of their self. In short, Religious is no longer concrete things and directly lives through human deepest core. Here, human starting to get his consciousness over the existence of God. This is where a sinner needs forgiveness from God.

In this novel, after going through the entire journey to get revenge but he cannot aim it. Victor starting to enter his religious stage which he realize that what he do is useless. And he needs an enlightenment to realize that what happen on him is because his ambition to create another human being, to create immortality and get compete with God. While he does not realize that God is the only one who can create human being.

Here, what makes Victor come to this stage is because of the monster already killed many of Victor's family, the people who are loved by Victor. Victor tried to get revenge and starting to haunt the monster, but Monster keep running and the monster keep making Victor run toward him. The monster wants Victor to feel miserable, sad and unhappy same as what the monster feel. And in his quest to get the monster, Victor suddenly realize that what he do is useless. In the middle of it, Victor meets someone who is also in a process of getting his ambition like what Victor did at past. Victor tells him his long story with all the regret in his heart and his mind.

“Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow.

Victor realizes that he is the man who wants to become greater than his nature will allow. Victor realizes that his knowledge comes into obsession and his obsession come into ambition. And it drops him into dangerous life.

‘I agree with you,’ replied the stranger; ‘we are unfashioned creatures, but half made up, if one wiser, better, dearer than ourselves— such a friend ought to be— do not lend his aid to perfectionate our weak and faulty natures. I once had a friend, the most noble of human creatures, and am entitled, therefore, to judge respecting friendship. You have hope, and the world before you, and have no cause for despair. But I—I have lost everything and cannot begin life anew.’

Victor is eventually realize that his ambition lead him become a human which against the nature. He realizes that he should not be someone who needs a perfection by creating immortality. He is living in miserable because he against what he should not be. He should not conquer the secret of nature. He realizes that he should not obsessed to much by science, he should not learn about supernatural knowledge and he should not feel that he can create a human being like God. After he realizes everything

and he realizes that only God can create a human. Victor stops his ambition and his journey and he die in peace after telling his story to Walton. Thus, Walton can get a lesson from his life journey.

“.....the dashing of the waterfalls around spoke of a power mighty as Omnipotence—and I ceased to fear or to bend before any being less almighty than that which had created and ruled the elements, here displayed in their most terrific guise.”

When Victor Frankenstein stated about omnipotence and the almighty, It really shows how Victor believe about the existence of “the almighty”. And this is one important point of being religious. A statement when Victor said that he should not fear or bend toward any being less than the almighty which had created and ruled the element. It is the moment when Victor reach his absolute religious stages before he come to die, and the story come to an end with Victor dead on his way of regretting himself. At the end of the story, the monster killed himself after knowing that Victor Frankenstein already died.

## **Conclusion**

Life journey of Victor happen after he own his obsession, and his life journey consist of three parts which is similar with Kierkegaard’s existentialism stages of human life. Aesthetical stage happens when Victor Frankenstein obsessed toward science and wants to get power of immortality of science by creating a new creature. the next stage is Ethical stage. Ethical stage of Victor Frankenstein life happen when he finally found his moral after he saw the monster he has creates does not come out like he always hoping. He starting to get a normal life again and thinking that what he has done is abandoned his family and only focuses on his obsession without thinking about his social surrounding. And the last stage is Religious stage, in this stage human starting to realize about the Almighty. Here, in religious stage Victor realize that all the misery happen in his life is because his own fault, because of his obsession Victor did not think about the effect and he did not think further that only God can make a creature. He started to realize the existence of The Almighty. It can be concluded that, the three stages of Victor Existentialism life happen because of his own obsession. And the whole Victor life resemblance the theory of Existentialism by Soren A. Kierkegaard.

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