Can too much knowledge ever be a bad thing? Victor Frankenstein discovers the secrets of creating life only to discover that his actions destined him to suffer eternally for his deed. Through the symbols of light and fire, the nature of the good and bad of knowledge is explored in *Frankenstein*. Mary Shelley uses the symbols of light and fire to convey her theme: creation must be handled with care or it will become a destroyer.

Victor takes on the role of creator when he creates the creature. In this way, he takes on a God-like role with the creature being Adam. Yet just as the creature finds out that fire can burn you if used improperly, Victor learns that his knowledge of creation is actually a curse. He tells Walton in his narration of his story: “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” (Shelley 36). Viewing knowledge, symbolized by light, from the perspective of someone who has seen the repercussions of taking it too far helps further the theme of creation. While in his pursuits of knowledge, Victor describes his journey: “I was like the Arabian who had been buried with the dead, and found a passage to life aided only by one glimmering, and seemingly ineffectual, light” (Shelley 36). His knowledge gained about life is obtained easily. The light, or knowledge, is something that guides him to discovery by directing his efforts toward that end, yet it doesn't show him the outcome.

In Walton's letter to his sister, he reveals his desire to discover the secret of life. He asks, “What may not be expected in a country of eternal light?” (Shelley 7). Light is used as a symbol of knowledge. Like Walton, Victor hopes to be able to discover things about natural philosophy, and especially physiology, that will increase his knowledge of science. While he sets to work in
his pursuit to create life, he comments: “Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world” (Shelley 37). This light that he speaks of is the knowledge that he has received about the secrets to creating life. He perceives it to be his duty to use his knowledge of life and death to make a human being. He embarks on this pursuit rather carelessly, thinking more about how he will be revered as creator and father rather than on the possible negative side effects of his actions. It is apparent that he has not yet thought through all of the ramifications of taking on a God-like role without having the proper motives behind his actions or the full knowledge of all that a human being might need once created.

The symbol of light is also shown by the creature as he comes to understand the meaning of creation when he learns how to build a fire. He says: “I found, with pleasure, that the fire gave light as well as heat” (Shelley 81). His knowledge is increasing as he learns about this positive element of fire: that it gives light and heat. However, he discovers the negative side to fire in the process: that fire harms you when you touch it. He expresses this juxtaposition when he says: “How strange, I thought, that the same cause should produce such opposite effects!” (Shelley 81). This symbolism is used to further exemplify the two sides to knowledge. When creating a human, just like creating a fire, there are natural good and bad consequences.

Victor becomes a creator through his gained knowledge of physiology, yet his motives for creating are morally wrong. He states one of his main objectives in creating being that “A new species would bless me as its creator” (Shelley 37). The symbolism of fire spoken of earlier applies well to his knowledge of creating life. Like the gift of fire, he has been given a great gift of creation to use as he pleases, but a condition of this power is that it must be used wisely. When his reasons for making a human are for glory and self-gain, there are natural consequences that he does not see until it is too late. He does not take into account the negative impact his creation
will have if not carefully controlled and the results planned out. The ultimate failure of his aspirations to create life is a result of what happens when knowledge is put to use for wrong purposes.

The human that Victor thought would revere him as creator does not turn out as he intends. Instead of blessing Victor for giving him life, the creature laments that he was ever made. The creature compares himself to Adam when he says: “He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator [...], but I was wretched, helpless, and alone” (Shelley 103-4). He lets his creator know that his existence is far from the full life that most humans around him are free to enjoy. Instead, he is a sorry imitation of what a perfect creation should look like. Victor fails to sympathize immediately with the creature, choosing instead to hate him the more and wish for him to be dead. Victor is not able to accept that he used his powers incorrectly and that there are consequences to his actions.

Fire is used symbolically when Victor first encounters the creature on the summit of Mont Blanc on his way back to his hometown of Geneva, having been two years since he had been given life. He sees the creature during a thunderstorm and describes his surprising discovery: “A flash of lightning illuminatated the object, and discovered its shape plainly to me; [...] it was the wretch, the filthy daemon to whom I had given life” (Shelley 57). The analogy of a fire's ability to both give light and burn you gives this scene more meaning as Victor is confronted with the reality of his actions. He finally realizes the consequences of his actions as he laments: “I had turned loose into the world a depraved wretch, whose delight was in carnage and misery” (Shelley 58). The fire he has created is no longer a possible source of light for Victor, but a burning anguish for letting a monster loose on the world.

Light and darkness is seen in conjunction with the creature's appearance. Immediately
after Victor first sees the creature in a flash of lightning, “the scene was enveloped in an impenetrable darkness” (Shelley 58). Then again when Victor is on the Mont Blanc mountains again, he remarks that “Their icy and glittering peaks shone in the sunlight over the clouds” (Shelly 76). This is precisely the moment that the creature appears. The symbolism in these instances is Victor facing the reality of what he has done. His creature brings darkness to his life and forces him to realize that knowledge has two sides: good and bad.

Victor's regret for having made the creature is not born of sympathy for his sufferings, but instead for his own sufferings with having made something so hideous and contemptible. The reader sees reason to sympathize with the creature, however, in his confrontation with Victor when he says: “Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live? Why, in that instant, did I not extinguish the spark of existence which you had so wantonly bestowed?” (Shelley 109). This apparent suffering of the creature gives another example of the repercussions of tampering creative powers and using knowledge improperly. Even Victor's creation can discern that he should never have been created.

Victor's ultimate creation turns out to be a failure when he realizes that he has created a monster who has the ability to kill people. He is also not prepared to give a more complete life for the creature. He created life with the intention to do good, but is forever paying the price for his actions. The light and fire symbols of the power of knowledge further develop this theme in *Frankenstein*. There is a good side and a bad side to knowledge; you must use the power wisely or you may get burned.
Works Cited