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The Adverse Effect of the Scientific Quest for Knowledge in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

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Abstract: This paper discusses knowledge and how its adverse effect appears upon human beings in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*. The she novelist shows that knowledge may have another ugly face, especially, when its use comes to destroy the world. The study starts with the introduction which presents, in brief, the meaning of science fiction and writing in this subject since the novel itself is a science fiction novel. Next is an overview about the novel, the circumstances of writing the novel, and the main ideas that Shelley has discussed in her *Frankenstein*. The second part of the paper analyzes some selected texts which show the quest for knowledge and its dangerous impact upon the world by exceeding the limits of life and death. Finally, the conclusion sums up the final result of the study as far as the subject is concerned.

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الأثر العكسي للبجث العلمي عن المعرفة في رواية فرانكشتاين لماري شيلي

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الخلاصة: تناقش هذه الورقة البحثية التأثير أو الاثر السلبي للعام و المعرفة على الانسان كما جاء في رواية فرانكشتاين للروائية ماري شيلي. تعرض الكاتبة الوجه المعاكس و الاخر للمعرفة خاصة عندما يأتي استخدام هذه المعرفة لتدمير العالم. تبدأ الدراسة بالمقدمة و التي تعرض بأختصار معنى الخيال العلمي و كتابة روايات الخيال العلمي و هذا ما تختص به الرواية المتناولة في هذا البحث. ثم تنتقل الدراسة الى ملخص عام عن الرواية و الذي يوضح ايضا الظروف المحيطة بكتابة الرواية بالاضافة الى الافكار الأساسية التي تناقشها الكاتبة في روايتها. يأتي الجزء الثاني من البحث لتحليل بعض النصوص المختارة في الرواية و التأثير السلبي للبحث العلمي عن المعرفة على العالم و البشرية جميعا عندما يتخطى هذا الاستخدام حدود الحياة و الموت. و أخيرا تنتهي الدراسة بالاستنتاج الذي يلخص ما تم التوصل اليه من نتائج عن موضوع البحث

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Introduction

Any story or setting which is based on imagination and not on history or facts is called fiction. In different forms, fiction can be expressed in various forms, such as, writings, live performances, films, television programs, animations, video games, and role playing games. The term 'fiction' originally refers to the literary narrative forms including novels, novellas, short stories, and dramas. It is occasionally used in a narrow sense to mean simply any literary form. Creative imagination mostly forms the act of fiction beside the real world which is not typically taken into account by the audience. Therefore, fiction is not commonly expected to present only characters who are actual people or descriptions that are factually accurate. Instead, the context is not precisely restricted to the real world; it is generally understood as being more open to interpretation. Characters and events within a fictional work may even be set in their own context entirely separate from the known universe; it is an independent world.

As for science fiction, it is a type of speculative fiction, usually deals with such imaginative concepts as futuristic science and technology, space travel, time travel,

faster than light travel, parallel universe, and extraterrestrial life. It often explores the potential consequences of science and has been called "literature of ideas". Science fiction stories are intended to have grounding in a science_based fact or theory at the time the story is created, but this connection is now limited to hard science fiction. Different opinions have been presented by critics about the nature of Science Fiction. Suvin Darko, for example, defines science fiction as "a literary genre or verbal construct whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment ".7

The critic and novelist Damien Broderick has developed and refined Suvin's consideration. He states that the blossom of Science Fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a result of the great cultural, scientific and technological progress; he calls these as 'epistemic changes' of that age. Science fiction for Broderick is "species of storytelling native to a culture undergoing the epistemic changes implicated in the rise and supersession of technical industrial modes of production, distribution, consumption and disposal".8 Moreover, he identifies features of Science fiction: metaphoric strategies and metonymic tactics, the foregrounding of icons and interpretive schemata from a collectively constituted generic 'mega text'; all previously published and the concomitant de_emphasis of 'fine writing' and characterization, and certain priorities more often found in scientific and postmodern texts than in literary models, specifically, attention to the object in preference to the subject. As for the writer and critic Samuel Delany, he has, on the other hand, challenged the validity of defining science fiction in terms of its subject matter, and suggests instead that it is "a vast play of codic conventions' which readers can apply to texts at the level of the sentence as much as the level of the text. He suggests that sentences such as "her world exploded" or "he turned on his left side" which have different meanings, depending on whether a reader approaches them as science fiction or ordinary fiction. He suggests that "most of our specific SF expectations will be organized around the question :what in the portrayed world of the story, by statement or implication, must be different from ours in order for this sentence to be normally uttered? "10 For Delany, in other words, SF is as much a reading strategy as it is anything else. A connection can also be found between fantasy and science fiction where "a fantastic event of development considered rationally." ¹¹ The fantasy sense adds a more active stream of unfamiliarity and excitement. Although it seems to be an incomprehensive definition, science fiction for James Gunn is the branch of literature which deals with the influence of changes on people's real world making a bridge between the past and the future to distant times and places. It revolves round scientific and technological matters that might be more important than the individual and community; civilization and race are usually in danger. 12

1.1 Frankenstein: Overview

First published anonymously does not prevent the reader from recognizing *Frankenstein*'s author Mary Shelley whose a vision began in the summer of 1816 at

the house of Byron on Lake Geneva, Switzerland, where she spent most of that summer together with her husband Percy Shelley. Inspired by reading a collection of a French translation of German ghost stories, they decide, at Byron's suggestion, to write a horror story. Mary Shelley finds herself unable to come up with an idea, but she is listening to Lord Byron and Percy Shelley discussing the possibility of creating an unnatural life according to a theory called galvanism, at the same time, they have mutual opinions about Erasmus Darwin's success in causing a piece of vermicelli to move voluntarily. Meanwhile, the idea of the novel grows in her mind. After that, Mary experiences a nightmare at that night in which she meets the science student and the monster that he has been created beside the machines that are used in the process of creation. The signs of life appear on the creature, thus, she feels terrified for God's rules and boundaries are now broken by that student. One day after, Mary Shelley starts her science fiction novel with "It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils . With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony .I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet." ¹³ A series of letters open and end the novel. The letters are sent by Robert Walton who is the Arctic explorer to his sister Mrs. Saville Walton. The series is devoted to scientific exploration and it has embarked upon the North Pole hoping to find a passage from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean and discovering magnetism in a land where sun never sets. It is a discovery which "has been his favorite dream of his early years." ¹⁴. Walton's letters keep his sister aware of what he has beard of suffering during his journey.

Meeting Frankenstein on the edge of death , Walton informs him that he is ready to sacrifice his wealth , life , and even hopes just to complete the journey. As a comment on Walton's encouraging speech , Frankenstein says : "Do you share my madness? Have you drunk also of the intoxicating draught? Hear me; let me reveal my tale , and you will dash the cup from your lips! "15. Intending his tale to be an example to dissuade Walton from continuing his Arctic campaign , Frankenstein makes this similarity between Walton's encouraging curiosity and drinking from a poisonous cup , a simile that brings readers to infer that he does know already that the quest for knowledge can lead to destruction. Frankenstein gives this warning as a typical of the discussion of knowledge pursuits and his voice provides an evidence upon which Mary Shelley does not agree that all knowledge is good and that the areas of knowledge which are far from human reach should not be pursued because they lead only to serious consequences.

Human attempts to obtain knowledge go beyond the law of Almighty God and Mother Nature; this idea is deeply rooted in the novel. On the other hand, Frankenstein's reference to knowledge as a serpent is based on the Christian story of Creation: Adam and Eve who were cast out of paradise because of the satanic serpent which persuaded them to eat of the tree of knowledge. Frankenstein's cautionary tale comes to have a great effect upon Walton. It is only after hearing Frankenstein's tale is Walton dissuaded from his pursuit. Rather than risking the lives of his crew, in the

dangerous north, Walton, at the end of the novel, sets aside personal ambition and turns back home. Frankenstein, recounting his story to the mariner, Walton, readers come to know that he, born in a rich family from Geneva, remains his parents' only child for the first five years of his life and is considered as being bestowed on them by heaven like a gift from God. Leading such an idyllic life gives Victor Frankenstein a sense of divine significance to interpret his parent's adaption of Elizabeth, as an action intended to entertain him.

Victor is very much left to his own devices, without much direction from his parents. Finding a book by Cornelius Agrippa which motivates his interest in alchemy, Frankenstein comes to blame his father having merely dismissed that work as sad trash. Frankenstein himself states that, if instead, his father had explained to him that alchemy had been rejected then it is possible that his ideas would never take him to his monstrous creation.

Seen as a cautionary tale of bad parenting, Frankenstein is unable to develop a clear and comprehensive understanding of human morality. Without any supervision, he engrosses himself in the works of alchemist, in an attempt to find a connection between life and death.

Frankenstein's thirst for knowledge later turns into an premonition, he comes to be preoccupied with the question of how one might reanimate the dead, a question to which he finds no answer in the works of alchemists. Not satisfied with their works, Frankenstein's quest eventually takes him to the more modern science which is conducted by Issac Newton.

Victor Frankenstein's shift of his thoughts from alchemy towards natural science comes after witnessing an oak tree , struck and destroyed by a lightening storm , a scene that confirms Frankenstein's intuition but greatly complicates his ambition. Though this incident has little to do with the laws of galvanism , and electricity. But , at least , brings Frankenstein very lately to conclude that in nature , there is this paradoxical oneness of life-giving and death-dealing ; in the dazzling light , where there is a revelation of life yet it is this revelation that causes the disaster ruin of the old beautiful oak in which Victor dwells with a fascinated horror that would not be out of place in the charnels of his subsequent research.

Frankenstein's interest in natural philosophy , however , reaches its peak when , at the age of seventeen , he is sent to the university of Ingolstadt where he meets Dr. Waldman , a professor of modern chemistry. Waldman appears to inspire Victor Frankenstein when he tells him about the greatness of Science and what scientist can do

Death appears to Frankenstein as the most irreparable evil, after his mother's death. In the novel, in addition to the contributing factors previously mentioned, namely the bad parenting Frankenstein receives, the exciting incident of the oak tree, and the introduction of Dr. Waldman, the most driving force to create the monster and

ultimately to reanimate life is the death of Frankenstein's mother. Her loss indeed demands him to seek in his studies for a way to struggle and overcome death.

Frankenstein feels sad and he is full of grief and suffering because of his mother's death. He experiences a so profound void of soul which , symbolically speaking , pushes him to retreat to nature or the sublime landscape of the Alps in an attempt to resurrect his dead mother. As a scientist , Frankenstein like Waldman , manipulates nature in order to master and control it towards the achievement and realization of his ends.

Mary Shelley's identification of nature as a female to be usurped introduces the readers to the negative consequences of the continuous increasing destruction of environment and the disruption of the delicate ecological balance between humankind and nature. She gives her warning against the dangerous division between the powers. This is a reference to seeking practice of science and the concerns of humanists with moral responsibility and spiritual values.

A question about science and its relation to humanity is centered at the heart of the novel where the novel questions the morality of Frankenstein's action. The question is decisive in the terms of whether Frankenstein has the right to perform the role of God , to create and to give life and death to his creation. Another question is proposed in acting technology if it leads to the improvement of man's life or , on the contrary , it has a dark side. So, Mary Shelley answers these two questions in the way that science and progress are ethically neutral with the ability to do and give hard efforts either for good or evil. Thus , this presents humans with the enormous challenge to handle its power responsibly and humanly.

Frankenstein describes his intellect as a result of his learning which solely focuses on science aside from receiving the education of social and moral matters. Morality is not in his mental vocabulary when he , with hectic excitement, pursues nature to her hiding places. For Frankenstein , the human and animal bones , organs , and meat that he had gathered to create what later he calls , the monster , are nothing but scientific instruments. In his horrible and offensive raiding of the graveyards , one can observe the utter dehumanization that is done with the help of technology.

Psychologically speaking, the novel highlights a very considerably inevitable fact that one's view of the world and his status may be changed radically. Mary Shelley emphasizes the fact that such changes may give man a place in new and difficult moral predicaments, therefore, she intends through her novel to provide a warning against the use of scientific intelligence that should be discovered from moral principles.

Frankenstein has ultimately the destructive desire to reveal to the world the deepest mysteries of creation. This touches the main theme of the simultaneous danger and God-like power which is inherent in knowledge. It is the fruit from the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil that tempted the Biblical Adam to his fall with the serpent , telling Eve that if she eats from the Tree of Knowledge , she will be as God knowing Good and Evil. Frankenstein's story also recalls the myth of Prometheus , which the novel directly addresses through its subtitle. As an analogue of the Titan Prometheus , who steals Zeus's fire , out of benevolence , to free humanity from the sickness of ignorance , Frankenstein unleashes forbidden knowledge upon humanity and pays the price of his aspiration. Sinful and insurgent in his pursuit of knowledge , Frankenstein seems to be ignorant of the message of Genesis that he should not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil , otherwise ; he would die.

This novel could be viewed as an apprehension of the new-born fear in regard to technological invention. Frankenstein is distinctly related to the revolutionary period of 1780 to 1830, which is the period of the first industrial revolution. In the pre-Victorian era, there was a strong conviction that rapid future changes would take place and there were wide differences of view about the extent to which these changes would be beneficial. Writing the novel during this historical context, Mary Shelley, unlike most of her contemporaries, expects the dangerous consequences of immoral technological employment inherent in scientific research and the exploitation of nature. As far as the novel is concerned, Mary Shelley's message is very clear; that a morally irresponsible scientific development can release a monster that can destroy human civilization itself.

1.2 Adverse Use of Knowledge in Frankenstein

Before delving into the novel , one should have an idea about knowledge itself. The term knowledge industry has received a very little attention in nineteenth century England. Knowledge becomes a phenomenon in English communal culture for the prompt growth of periodicals , encyclopedias , and societies promoting knowledge. However , knowledge movement is an important record of a culture by its own science and technology. Influenced by history , the literature of knowledge remains a strong symbol of early Victorian culture. On the other hand , there is the comprehensive knowledge which is not merely the ambition of the intellectual elite , but a growing population of readers belong to all classes recognize that some degree of social statue can be gained through learning. Being emblematic of England's stature within the scientific community , knowledge reflects the growing prosperity of the country. ¹⁶

Moreover, women and children become decisive target audience for the authors and publishers who attempt to profit from the rising interest in inventions and new faces into nature's secret workings. Mary Shelley learns from such subjects as these which treat the connection between nature and technological advancements and scientific theories. In fact, she acquires a lot of knowledge in the world of fact and fiction.

Frankenstein , as Muriet Spark describes , is a novel of scientific speculation which the growth of prophecy necessarily resides. ¹⁷ N. K. Joseph's introduction to Frankenstein states that Mary Shelley links the myth of Prometheus within the current scientific theories and suggests there is a part of life which is electrical or quasi-electrical even in nature. ¹⁷ Furthermore , Frankenstein has been investigated by feminist critics who analyze the novel as being one of the originals in science fiction.

Mary Shelley discusses the life of science in her novel and tries to place knowledge in the position of controlling this life. The core of her novel is to discover a forbidden principle of life which is bringing dead human bodies into life again. Having knowledge is the base of reviving this principle; Victor Frankenstein has this knowledge by which he enters history. It is ironic and unacceptable to see that Victor the creator experiences a sever confrontation with the creature that he made. Getting into this scientific project, Victor hopes to accomplish an immortal discovery for scientific purposes and unleash the opportunity for both science and life. Instead, his creature becomes a monster who permanently conflicts his master.

The novel open with Victor Frankenstein's autobiographical presentation for his childhood. His life, as he tells, starts in a loving happy family where he finds love and support. He learns the first lesson in life through his family who also give him the important principles of life they are love and patience: most "My parents loved each other very much, and I learnt from the example of their love....I learnt that to love and to be patient are the most important things in the world." (Shelley, Frankenstein, Ch. 2, p.4)

Under a loving and caring atmosphere , Victor Frankenstein continues his education until he finds the university another suitable environment where he learns other principles. This time the learning process takes a different direction far away from heart , feelings , and emotions. He receives facts ,science , and the principles of practical life.

While Victor Frankenstein is using electricity in medicine, he goes back to his memory when he was fifteen and saw an electrical storm destroying the old tree in front of his house. This memory comes parallel to professor Waldman's speech, who was one of the greatest scientists in the world, saying that some of his students will be the great scientists of tomorrow:

"On my first day at the university I met my teacher, Professor Waldman....After the professor's talk, I thought very carefully. I remembered the storm when I was fifteen. I remembered to use electricity to help people, and I wanted to discover the secrets of life. I decided to work on these two things. I did not know then that my work would destroy me and the people that I love." (Shelley, Frankenstein, Ch. 3, p. 7)

Victor sees the world around him through the eyes of science and he is so obsessed with acquiring knowledge which is eventually turns tragic. This knowledge leads to his own destruction and the people he loves.

After two years of hard work in his laboratory, Victor succeeds in designing the machine which helps answer his question about how life begins and if there possibility to bring the dead into life again:

"After two years I had discovered many things and I built a scientific machine...My machine would help me answer the most important question of all. How does life begin? Is it possible to put life into dead things? To answer these questions about life I had to learn about death....In the hospital and in the university, I watched the dying and the dead. Day after day, month after month, I followed death... It was a dark and terrible time." (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, *Ch. 3*, *p. 8*)

The young ambitious scientist starts digging in the philosophy of life and death which is something beyond the human control and limits. Victor starts a very dangerous invention hoping that he will give the world immortality. His description for the time to be dark and terrible represents a foreshadowing for the terrible and dark future of his world.

"Then one day, the answer came to me . Suddenly I was sure that I could put life into a body that was not alive." (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, *Ch.3,p.8*).

He refers to the fact that quest for the knowledge of what is beyond results humankind to do out of control disastrous things. He implicitly admits that no human being is allowed to perform the role of God for there are things should be kept beyond the human understanding. Thus, Victor is observed by Shelley in showing his fear: "Fear for my family and hate for my monster with me day and night" (Shelley, Frankenstein, Ch.3, p. 9).

Returning back to the time of Victor's first preparations to create his man from different parts of corpses, he explains his use of knowledge in a careful way:"In my laboratory I made a body I bought a stole all the pieces of human body that I needed, and slowly and carefully. I put them all together." (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, *Ch.3,p.10*).

Fascinated by the unique knowledge he has got , Victor does not rethink of the adverse effect that he may bring to himself and humanity as a whole. He thinks of the physical creature as a great accomplishment forgetting the future consequences of the same creature. After hard work , he creates a monstrous man instead of a man of normal human structure. So ,Victor Frankenstein's shock reflects people's reaction towards this new man because their look is based simply on the way he looks. The creator now is spiritually exhausted and very scared. In his deep consciousness , Victor measures facts as he presents a monster-like man to the world. Even though this creature has good-heart features , people study and examine his physical

appearance which psychologically speaking may affect the creature in the way he feels a cast and so acts and reacts like a real monster.

At the beginning, Victor suffers from the expected disasters from his creature. But after witnessing the murder of his young brother William and his friend Justin by the creature, Victor desperately confronts him saying: "At first I could not speak because I hated him so much. But at last I said: You are an evil creature. I shall kill you if I can, because you have killed two people that I love." (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, *Ch.6*, *p.20*).

Victor's words show his regret for using the dangerous knowledge and his hate towards not only the creature himself but towards the scientific knowledge that lead to destroy his family and friends as well. It is just the beginning, danger will include the world too.

Though he nobly wishes to break the bounds of death and to illuminate humanity by his science, Frankenstein is conscious of playing the role of God by setting himself as a revered idol. He is revealing his hubris and overstepping bounds in a kingdom that human are not allowed to enter. By loosening the chains of life and death, Frankenstein is heading towards his doom and he admits that the monster is a "living monument of presumption and rash ignorance that I had let loose upon the world". (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, *p.* 96).

As for the creature, he lives an unstable sort of life as he becomes unable to recognize the world around him easily. Just like a new-born child, the creature starts learning language. He is trying to socialize people, but his ugly structure prevents him from experiencing the opportunity to understand the world. As a matter of fact, he is so negatively influenced by maltreating by that he changes from humanity into monstrosity:

"I am the unhappiest creature in the world, the monster said. One day I saw my face in the water of the river. It was a terrible face. I understood why people were frightened Why they shouted and threw stones." (Shelley, Frankenstein, Ch.6, pp.20-24).

The monster expresses sadness and agony. Like Victor, he is psychologically suffering but the world does not listen to his pain. Having feeling means that the monster has a part of humanity. Victor and the world cooperate to change his soul into a real monster's soul for giving him no chance to show his inner human part. They misjudge him and look at his ugly shape only.

As the novel describes, Victor's creature is eight feet long and has a yellowish yellow skin color which also tends to green. There are thread marks that are visible on most of his body parts. His hair is dark black while his teeth are white. His physical look is very dreadful even to the monster himself. The establishment of a different race within this creature precedes his inevitable placement within the lowest classes of

society and the astracization from those who belong to the upper class. In fact, even the lower class do not accept him or recognize his existence.

The creature also conveys his experience of language learning, specially, after Victor rejects him. Thus, he adopts self-learning:

"After I began to understand some of the noises that the people made to each other. The first words that I understood were words like "fire" and "bread". I also learnt that the three people called each other by name." (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, *Ch.6*, *p.24*).

It is the ability to utilize language in the boundary that separates the creature from society. In order to validate his human existence, he must communicate with that society using its language. But, the "creature's use of language has failed to gain him entry into the chain of existence and events. [He] has rather made him fully aware of his unique and accursed origin" After many attempts, he finally learns language from the villagers through experience and observation. He also learns some actions, such as, cooking by using fire. Soon, he discovers signs that corresponds to speech. He is trying to understand the environment to which he belongs, therefore, he educates himself in order to discover his identity as well. In addition to his gradually developed intellectual abilities, the creature shows emotional capacities when he presents his aid to the cottagers and desire for love. The social rejection that the creature receives because of his ugly body makes his confidence in his position in that society hesitant and doubtful.

So, at the end Victor the maker plans to get rid of his creature by asking Walton to kill the devil. Victor's self realization of his wrong use for knowledge urges him to find salvation through destroying this scientific project. He starts motivating Captain Walton by reminding him of how the monster has killed his family and friends: "I ask you, Captain Walton, to chase the monster and kill him, do not listen to what he say. He knows how to argue, and perhaps you will feel sorry for him. But remember that he is evil. Remember the death of William, Justine, Henry Clerval, Elizabeth, my father.... and remember me. Victor Frankenstein." (Shelley, Frankenstein, Ch. 6, p.25).

Victor warns Walton of the creature's intellectuality for he has the ability to argue and persuade. This means that Victor's monster has succeeded in his self education. Victor realizes this fact , however , he devotes his mind for destroying his creature instead of containing him or at least taking a step towards changing the monster into human. It is ironic to hear Victor naming his creature an evil whereas the maker may deserve this name. If supposedly the creature is a real evil , Victor is the founder of this evil since he played what lies beyond human roles ; that is God's role.

Conclusion

Although it is a fact that knowledge causes advantages in all aspects of life, it sometimes shows another ugly face. Destruction may come as a result for knowledge misuse as Victor Frankenstein has done when he makes knowledge as the source for his invention the monster. Ambition and inspiration are necessary in life, but they should be directed to the right and useful destination.

Victor Frankenstein follows his excessive ambition unthinking of the dangerous results that may be achieved by creating a half human and half monster. He interferes in God's work taking a risk of his society and humanity as a whole. Even though his intention is to serve humanity by creating immortality, Frankenstein should submit to one inevitable fact that he cannot be a creator whatever the degree of knowledge he has got. He tries to answer the question of life and death, however, the answer has come disastrous since the secrets of life remain chained with God's, the Creator, authority only.

Pain and sadness has been brought not only to Victor and his family or his society, the creature also suffers because of his missing any identity in this life. He and people around cannot classify him under any class or species. His ugliness adds more to this pain since no one tries at least to listen or understand the human voice inside of him. Everyone becomes a victim here for knowledge and its user.

Notes

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