

KÖNIGS ERLÄUTERUNGEN

Band 363

Mary Shelley, **FRANKENSTEIN**

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PRÜFUNGSAUFGABEN MIT MUSTERLÖSUNGEN

In Ergänzung zu den Aufgaben im Buch (Kapitel 6) finden Sie hier zwei weitere Aufgaben mit Musterlösungen. Die Zahl der Sternchen bezeichnet das Anforderungsniveau der jeweiligen Aufgabe.

Aufgabe 5 **

Find out about the scientific argument which is known as the "vitalism debate". Explain what it was about and whether it influenced Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. The internet resources mentioned on p. 139 of the "Königs Erläuterungen" study guide can help you to obtain information.

DISCUSSION

Mögliche Lösung in knapper Fassung:

The so-called "vitalism debate" revolved around the question of the nature of life and drew a lot of attention not just in scientific circles but also among the wider general public. Its protagonists were two professors of surgery and anatomy at the Royal College of Surgeons in London, William Lawrence and John Abernethy. In a series of lectures, which he delivered in March 1816, Lawrence challenged the vitalist views held by his former mentor Abernethy. Vitalism is a doctrine which argues that life arises from an immaterial and invisible "vital force". For some followers of vitalism, this force was essentially similar to the soul while others came to the conclusion that the mysterious spark of life was supplied by an electric fluid. Around 1800 there was a lot of speculation concerning the relationship between electricity and biology and scientists like Luigi Galvani performed experiments to examine the role of electricity in living organisms.

William Lawrence however considered vitalism as pseudo-scientific. In his mechanistic conception of nature, life processes are entirely physical and chemical phenomena and the human body including the brain is a biological machine. It does not contain two substances as the vitalists believed (matter and vital force) but merely one, namely matter, which is why this school of thought is called materialism. The processes in the nervous system only serve to regulate and maintain the body's functions. The vitalism debate reveals the ideological differences between modern rational science and the kind of science which appealed to the Romantic imagination. These two concepts competed with each other at the beginning of the 19th century. While materialism appears to be cold, detached and abstract, vitalism is based on a cohesive view of nature and is emotionally satisfying.

The vitalism debate: What is the essence of life?	
vitalism	materialism
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Life consists of the combination of two substances (matter and an immaterial "vital principle" / "spark of life" / "electric fluid" / "the soul")• metaphysical• related to religious ideas and/or the poetic imagination	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Life knows only one substance: Everything in the universe is just matter• The body is a biological machine• mechanistic• states that knowledge comes only from what can be observed and experimentally verified

The vitalism debate fell into the years when Mary Shelley conceived and wrote *Frankenstein* and it is very likely that it was a source of inspiration for her. She was generally well-informed about developments in the scientific community in London, not least because her father's house was an intellectual hub. Distinguished "natural philosophers", poets and politicians met at his house. Among William Godwin's regular guests was William Lawrence, the main proponent of materialism, who later also became the physician of Percy Shelley, Mary's husband. Another friend of Godwin's was Humphry Davy, a leading chemist of his day who thought that electricity is a vital fluid that animated living creatures. Mary probably attended some of Davy's spectacular lectures.

Under Lawrence's influence, Percy Shelley tended to the mechanistic view of life. This, however, did not prevent him from considering possible the existence of a vitalist "principle of life". This is one of the

Ergänzung zu:

reasons why it is often claimed that Victor Frankenstein is modelled after the author's husband. Frankenstein operates like a materialist engineer when he mechanically assembles a number of components taken from dead bodies. But by breathing life into his creature, probably using an electrical battery to provide the spark of life, he acts like a vitalist. Thus he does something which the materialists considered to be impossible (which in fact it is) and which responsible vitalists would have rejected. In any case, Victor Frankenstein's creature is cobbled together not just from body parts but also from pieces taken from incompatible systems of thought – materialism and vitalism

Aufgabe 6 ***

Write an essay on the following topic: "Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus and the Black Lives Matter movement in the UK". In the essay give an account of the origins and aims of the movement and then how they are reflected by Mary Shelley's novel.

Look for background information in the works of black British journalists and writers like Afua Hirsch, David Olusoga and Reni Eddo-Lodge and also in the "Königs Erläuterungen" study guide, pp. 29–34 and 105–108.

Mögliche Lösung in knapper Fassung:

ESSAY

The Black Lives Matter movement is a volunteer-run, non-profit organization that focuses on taking action to end systemic racism against people of African descent and other people of colour. It developed in the USA in 2013 in the wake of high-profile killings of black Americans by the police and white vigilante groups. In 2020, BLM protests went global after the death of George Floyd, another unarmed African American man who became a victim of police brutality. It reminded people in many other places around the world of their own experiences of racism.

The movement especially gained momentum in European countries that had built large colonial empires and had in the past like the USA massively profited from the enslavement and exploitation of millions of Africans. One of these countries is the UK where many people believe that anti-black racism is mainly an American problem while in fact it originated in Britain in the 17th and 18th centuries. The journalist Afua Hirsch, who is British-Ghanaian, even refers to Britain as the "Ground Zero" of the ideology that dehumanized Africans. In order to justify acts of cruelty like the slave trade, Africans were stripped of their human qualities and dignity. Many black people, whose ancestors were brought to Britain after the Second World War to do low-wage labour, believe that the colonial racism is perpetuated in today's racist profiling by the police and in their living conditions which are still worse than those of their white neighbours. During the pandemic of 2020 people from ethnic minority backgrounds disproportionately died from the coronavirus.

Consequently, British BLM protesters do not just demand equal and fair treatment but also a candid reckoning with the country's colonial history and its present-day aftermath. They condemn the widespread nostalgia for empire, of which Brexit is an expression, and the collective amnesia surrounding the nation's involvement in the horrors of colonialism. In a text published in June 2020, performance poet Piers Harrison-Reid, articulated well what many black people in Britain believe: "I think the greatest trick racism ever pulled, was convincing England it [racism] doesn't exist."

An effort by society to confront the shadows of the past needs to start by viewing history not solely from the colonizers' perspective but also from the point of view of the colonized. It is a process which has already brought some surprising facts to public awareness, for example that the loans the government had taken on to fund the abolition of slavery in 1833 were so vast that they were only paid off in 2015. And the money was not used as one might expect to compensate the former slaves. It went to the 46.000 slaveholders most of whom owned plantations in British colonies in the Caribbean. For people like the journalist and playwright Juliet Gilkes Romero these news presented a shock: "What blew me away was here I was, a working woman, a descendent of the transatlantic slave trade, and I helped pay off this massive loan". For many British citizens with roots in the former colonies it is also difficult to tolerate that there are still statues in London and other cities glorifying empire-building. In June, international attention was attracted when in Bristol a huge crowd of protesters pulled down the statue of notorious slave-trader Edward Colston and then pushed it into the docks.

How does Frankenstein come into play in this context, a two-hundred year old novel which in many people's eyes is primarily a cautionary tale about the dangers of unbridled scientific progress? In fact, it is much more than that because Victor Frankenstein's artificial creature regarded by society as a monster is a highly mutable political metaphor with seemingly limitless potential to resonate all over again with every generation of readers. It represents all human beings who are stigmatized as dangerous and frightening others, savages or people of color by the dominant groups in a society and are relegated by them to the

margins of humanity. That is why *Frankenstein* can also be interpreted as a radical critique of racism which is still relevant in an age when black people and other minorities continue to be discriminated against.

With his “lustrous black” hair, “teeth of a pearly whiteness” (92) and his enormous height and physical strength, the creature fits the contemporary stereotype of the enslaved African. Shelley demonstrates how this being is not something that exists of its own accord but was designed and built by a white European according to his own ideas. The monstrous other has no reality except in the mind of his creator. Supposedly, this creature has been evil from birth, but this is also something that is only attributed to it by society. The monster was innately good and only resorts to violence after it has endured rejection, hatred and threats for a long time. The social isolation that it suffers reflects the experience of enslaved Africans who were often separated from their family and community not only when they arrived in America but each time they were sold and sent to a different plantation. Another part of their personal identity and individuality they were stripped of were their names because they existed on paper only under their owners’ names. The nameless monster has a similar problem. Many people wrongly refer to it as Frankenstein.

The creature is highly intelligent and articulate, not mumbling and clunky like Boris Karloff’s iconic movie monster. It has patience with Frankenstein, makes powerful appeals to him, reminds him of his duties and condemns inequities in no uncertain terms. The creature’s demands in his eloquent speeches are similar to the ones made by today’s BLM activists: It wants fairness and compassion, the right to be heard, social participation. His message is not divisive as his master’s but unifying. But Frankenstein remains merciless like the slaveowners in the colonies or the cop who did not take his knee away from the neck of George Floyd even though he pleaded: “I can’t breathe”. Only then does the creature’s hope of acceptance and belonging finally fade and change into uncontrollable fury.

Mary Shelley was well-informed about the situation in the colonies. One of her acquaintances, Matthew Gregory Lewis, was the owner of plantations and 500 slaves on Jamaica. He also wrote Gothic fiction and visited the Shelleys in 1816 in Geneva where Mary first conceived *Frankenstein*. For her, racism is a basic evil that destroys society from within. In the novel she restores the humanity of the slaves. She makes the reader comprehend the reasons for their anger and points out the deadly consequences of a failure to fulfill their legitimate desire for justice and equality.

The traumatic experiences of the oppressed in the past are preserved in Shelley’s story and can be retrieved from it by modern-day readers. At the same time its Gothic scenarios picture a world that has been turned into a nightmare by the corrupting influence of racism. Victor Frankenstein himself falls into a never-ending feverish dream of guilt and fear. Thus the novel illustrates how unstable a society becomes when it is based on racial hierarchies. There can be no doubt that Shelley disapproves of anarchy but also that she asks who is responsible when righteous anger about never-ending injustice results in unrest and violence. Is it the party that gives free rein to their rage or the one that initially drove them to do so with their cruel actions? Or are they both responsible? So who is the real monster: the creature or its creator?