

## Text - Prometheus unbound

### Prometheus

Prometheus was chained to a rock for challenging the gods (stole fire for humanity and created a man from clay). His punishment was to have an eagle eat his liver endlessly as the liver would grow back every day.

Prometheus is traditionally considered as the champion of human enlightenment versus the undisputed power of the gods. He figured progress and civilization.

In the 19th century, Prometheus became the allegorical figure of man's scientific pretensions of equalling God in the creating process.

Prometheus could set man free from god's yoke. With Prometheus, man would contemplate progress: progress became possible

Mary Shelley illustrated this modern vision of the myth in Frankenstein. Victor Frankenstein (the first name announcing the ambitions of the man) set about creating a new man from parts of dead bodies.

His "Promethean" enterprise was punished. He created a monster who turned against its creator.

Man plays the sorcerer's apprentice: when he meddles with life/interferes with nature

We should tread carefully on those issues

The regeneration of the cells to recreate liver cells and a human liver is another meaning of this painting, [mentioned in §3](#).

### Vocabulary

§1 to feast on: se rassasier  
anew: de nouveau to start anew  
a shocker: un livre à sensation

§2 Life imitates art : a famous aphorism by Oscar Wilde (Picture of Dorian Gray)

§3 wellspring: source

setting: environment

§4

§5 to prevail: prévaloir  
it's been a long road: cela a pris du temps  
to halt: interrompre  
powerhouse: le centre névralgique, l'endroit où tout se passe

winding the clock back: remonter le temps  
to bypass: contourner, éviter

§8 to deliver: remplir ses promesses

### Summary

§ 1 and 2 Put back the title in mythological perspective: (Not explained very well ) , first Prometheus and then Victor Frankenstein, the modern Prometheus. Like Victor Frankenstein, modern biology is trying to imitate nature by regenerating life and organs.

This poses the same dilemma as it did: "the Promethean dream" or the "Frankenstein nightmare"

§3 Uses the adjective "titanic" (Prometheus was a Titan). Explain what stem cells are: not specialized cells that could be used to make "spare parts" of the body. Called pluripotent

§4 Since they are at the source of life ("wellsprings" in §3), they are found abundantly in the embryo.

§5 Hence the ethical debate over the use of human embryo (and culture of cells) as a commodity (cf. debate over IVF and extra embryos).

So, another idea cropped up: why not bring adult cells back into a pluripotent stage as "at the beginning of life. This would settle the the moral problem.

§6 , 7 These paragraphs explain how some doctors in their labs devised a system that enabled them to create liver proteins.

### Questions asked during the class:

What is **the thorny issue** at stake in this text?

The issue of **stem-cell research**: **Why is stem-cell research controversial** (especially in the USA)?

- Because it is said to tamper with life

Why?

Because it uses embryos (**embryonic stem cells**).

Why do some people judge that this is not **ethically permissible**?

- Because it is said to turn the embryo into a **commodity** (*un bien échangeable, commercial?*) used to create **spare parts** (*pièces détachées/de rechange*) for the human body
- Because this type of **genetic engineering** could lead to **cloning**, which would amount to playing the sorcerer's apprentice
- Would some kind of new Victor Frankenstein try to **create a master race**?

So, what scientific **breakthrough**, in the domain of stem-cell research, may **assuage/allay the public's fears**?

Scientists have found a way to turn adult cells back into pluripotent stem cells (that is to say cells that are **versatile** enough to develop into organ cells and so regenerate an organ).

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Which fears would be **allayed** and which ones wouldn't? On the one hand, the fear of having embryos created for the sole purpose of being used as "**spare parts**" for the human body would be assuaged. But, on the other hand, the debate over the morality of man's **tampering with nature** is here to stay.

Do you remember why the journalist conjures up **the myths of Prometheus** and of **Frankenstein**, that is to say the **Modern Prometheus**:

So the two meanings of the analogy with Prometheus is:

1. Quite obviously, the regeneration of the cells to recreate liver cells and a human liver
2. More interestingly, Prometheus is traditionally considered as the champion of human enlightenment versus the undisputed power of the gods.  
He figures progress and civilization. But, at the same time, Prometheus epitomizes man's hubris.