The Humane Monster and the Monstrous Human: An Investigation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

Since the publication of its first edition in 1818, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* has gradually become one of the most recognized, mimicked and re-interpreted tales in the horror genre. The story of a scientist and the grotesque monster he creates from the piecing together of dead organs seems rife for imitation and easy campfire thrills. But a less facile reading of the text yields perhaps an even more haunting psychological drama from Shelley’s work than is generally discussed. By constructing a tale about the apparent binary between familiar human society and the monstrosity of isolation and “otherness”, Shelley is masterfully able to conflate the two, eventually to such a point that the barrier dividing humanity and the grotesque is next to invisible. By novel’s end, there seems little evidence to support that Dr. Frankenstein could not himself be labeled just the sort of “wretch” he had routinely accused his creation of being. In a striking parallel, the Monster comes to himself illustrate what are generally accepted to be the human qualities of compassion, reason and remorse. Both characters, then, travel similar paths of self-creation, though the modes and conclusions of their respective journeys be different.

It is perhaps best to open our discussion not at the beginning of the novel, but at the first exchange of dialogue between the Monster and his creator, as the scene dynamically illustrates the compelling philosophies which they come to acquire. As their confrontation doesn’t occur until the novel’s second volume, each character has already experienced suffering independent of one another, and their respective transformations are already well underway – the Monster has learned enough about human nature to form skeptical yet, for a time, optimistic opinions of it, and Victor has experienced enough private pains to question his own scientific pursuits as well as his own sanity.

The collision of these two characters, and consequently of their competing philosophies, is perhaps an unexpected one, both in its timing and in the content of its dialogue. The apparently daemonic Monster ironically appears to Victor immediately after the doctor appeals to heaven in a fleeting moment of contentment. The doctor pleads to “wandering spirits” that he be granted sanctuary from his inner turmoil, begging, “allow me this faint happiness, or take me, as your companion, away from the joys of life” (65). He is greeted, however, not by some sort of celestial vision, as might more readily be expected, but by what will eventually be the harbinger of his own death. At this point in the novel, it seems Dr. Frankenstein has already fallen so far from heavenly grace that even his prayers have been corrupted.

Shelley inserts yet another twist into this scenario (one which underscores most of her novel and is also the concern of this essay) when she presents the Monster as being more articulate, less feral and considerably more human than Victor upon their first meeting. Seeing the creature bound towards him over the ice, Frankenstein readies
himself with what can perhaps best be explained as primal responses to an expected attack: “A mist came over my eyes…I trembled with rage and horror, resolving to wait his approach, and then close with him in mortal combat…anger and hatred had first deprived me of utterance” (65). Given these circumstances, it is expected that the reader is about to witness a physical confrontation, one which the giant— and presumably bloodthirsty— Monster would almost surely win. Both the reader and Frankenstein are thrown, however, by what instead becomes a verbal exchange, and though one would hardly expect the creature to best Dr. Frankenstein in this situation as well, the Monster’s employment of reason and a firm desire for acceptance illustrate he is able to do just that. Showing that he is a creature of contemplation and feeling, the Monster effectively complicates what for Dr. Frankenstein had previously been the simple matter of erasing his “mistake” of a creation.

The Monster manages this feat, in part, by coolly and concisely appealing to the doctor in the terms of human fairness (“the guilty are allowed, by human laws, bloody as they may be, to speak in their own defence before they are condemned”) and by also evading his own injury while still consciously refraining from doing the doctor any physical harm (67). Frankenstein recalls simply that when the Monster first leapt to the attack he “easily eluded me”, though we later learn that the Monster is easily capable of “[tearing people] limb from limb, as the lion rends the antelope” (91). It’s worth noting, however, that the Monster does not typically choose this strategy unless and until no other recourse seems available to him. In contrast, his creator is so wrecked by hatred that violence continually operates as his primary response to the Monster, a fact which illustrates Frankenstein’s need to reduce everything to passionate, uncomplicated amorality. “Let us try our strength in fight,” demands Frankenstein in spite of his own physical inferiority, “in which one must fall” (66). It is this dark and all-consuming focus, in fact—the simple obliteration of the Monster—which eventually results in the death of the doctor’s wife and, consequently, the impossibility of Frankenstein ever achieving human domestic tranquility.

The manner of the doctor’s character and devolvement throughout the story, however, suggests that familial or domestic ties where perhaps idealized by his own memory: “I feel pleasure in dwelling on the recollections of childhood, before misfortune had tainted my mind” (21). Chronologically, the story of Frankenstein begins with a glossy and rather brief description of Victor’s upbringing, followed by a much more impassioned account of his discovery of the sciences, an interest which his own father tried to manage and steer. Interestingly, it is Victor’s father who indirectly influences Frankenstein’s study of the very sciences which impel him to create the “wretch” he comes to hate. It is his father’s dismissal of Agrippa’s science as merely “sad trash” that only fuels Victor’s interest in it further (perhaps as an act of youthful rebellion) and sets him on the course of study which leads to the creation of the Monster.

Even Victor himself seems to pay recognition to this fact during the relating of his personal history. On the subject of his father’s disinterest in the son’s preferred sciences, Victor comments on “the many opportunities instructors possess of directing the attention of their pupils to useful knowledge, which they utterly neglect” (21). It is certainly notable, however, that it is Frankenstein’s father who introduces him to the power of electricity, the apparently useless knowledge which later becomes a key ingredient in Victor’s animation of the Monster.
Where the idea of family becomes tangential to Frankenstei
n’s obsessions with
himself and with his science for much of the novel (even his grief over the murder of
William is predominantly self-centered, as will later be shown), the Monster’s interest in
some semblance of family or domesticity is key to his emotional and intellectual
development. Through his discovery of the DeLacey family, the Monster learns not only
the tools of language but also (and perhaps more importantly) the human values of
compassion, sympathy, empathy, altruism and love: “when they were unhappy, I felt
depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathized in their joys” (75). Though the warmth of
these values comes as a welcome enticement to the Monster, his deformities keep him at
a perpetual distance from ever fully being on the receiving end of it. Shelley handles this
painful realization expertly, because our sympathy for the Monster’s tragic position –
even when brave enough to venture from his hiding-place, he is shunned and hated –
brings us to feel, ironically, more of a human connection with the inhuman but
fundamentally compassionate Monster than we are ever allowed to feel for the human
(but inwardly focused) Frankenstei.

The trial and conviction of Justine for William’s murder is perhaps the strongest
example of Dr. Frankenstei’s crippling self-involvement. In the letter informing
Frankenstein of William’s murder, Victor’s father asks Victor to come home “not
brooding thoughts of vengeance against the assassin, but with feelings of peace and
gentleness, that will heal, instead of festering the wounds of our minds” (46). Not
surprisingly, the doctor is unable or unwilling to comply with this request, and never
tries to console his family, as he is too interested in the “living torture” brought upon
himself by the creation of the Monster. By his own admission, in fact, his “first thought
was to discover what [he] knew of the murderer, and cause instant pursuit to be made”
(49). That this is a personal endeavor for Frankenstei is clear, as his Ahab-like
obsession with demolishing the Monster is the novel’s driving mechanism from
beginning to end. Although Frankenstei masks his pursuit as vengeance for William
and Justine, it remains at heart an extension of his own self-indulgence.

Any doubt of this can be removed by investigating Frankenstei’s thoughts and
disposition during and immediately after Justine’s trial. Although he certainly harbors
information of Justine’s innocence in the case of William’s murder, he chooses not to
come forward with it because he remarks that “if any other had communicated such a
relation to me, I should have looked upon it as the ravings of insanity” (49). Grasping at
justifications for his silence in Justine’s time of need, Frankenstei also (almost
immediately) arrives at a second reason, namely, that no one could conceivably enforce
the law on a being of the Monster’s size and strength. Frankenstei’s ability to
rationalize and re-rationalize his withholding of information that might clear Justine’s
name shows a cold and clinical disinterest in anyone but himself and his personal pursuit
of the Monster. Elizabeth’s statement upon testifying at Justine’s trial, in fact, seems to
be an indirect and unknowing commentary on just this sort of self-indulgence: “when I
see a fellow-creature about to perish through the cowardice of her pretended friends,” she
says, “I wish to be allowed to speak, that I might say what I know of her character” (54).
For her part, Elizabeth willfully makes a decision which Frankenstei is not altruistic or
moral enough to make, himself a prime example of the cowardice of which Elizabeth
speaks. That Frankenstei openly recognizes that he “not in deed, but in effect, was the
true murderer” makes his silence even more heinous (61).
Frankenstein’s selfish inaction during Justine’s trial and conviction can readily be contrasted with the Monster’s experiences with the DeLacey family, whom he mostly watches from afar and with whom he has no blood relation or personal history. Even so, the Monster is outwardly-focused enough to routinely recognize the joy that the DeLaceys feel in each other’s company, as well as the pleasures they take from even the smallest acts of kindness. His ability to evaluate the DeLaceys independent of his previous (and unfavorable) experiences with the “barbarity of man” is further illustration that the Monster acts not out of impulse, but out of reason, curiosity about individual situations, and a longing to find and claim his place in some frame of society. Initially, the DeLaceys are as strange and as curious to the Monster as he deems he himself is to the human race, but the Monster demonstrates a patience not reciprocated to him by others: “perpetual attention, and time, explained to me many appearances which were at first enigmatic” (74). The Monster is also shown as being a fundamentally giving creature, acting out of a curiosity and interest in the DeLaceys’ well-being, wholly lacking any aims for self-gratification: “I heard them, on these occasions, utter the words good spirit, wonderful; but I did not then understand the significance of these terms” (77).

Perhaps even more important, the Monster possess the very human quality of foresight – something which Dr. Frankenstein almost entirely lacks, except insofar as he presumes that the creation of a second, female Monster would be a danger to society. After observing the DeLacey family from a distance, the Monster reasons that without first mastering their language, he will never be able to secure an audience with any of the family members. Recognizing that his physical features – and not his disposition or reason – are his primary obstacles, he appropriately develops a plan and approaches the DeLacey who is incapable of seeing him. In this simple example alone, the Monster shows that he is able to draw relatively reasonable conclusions about the world surrounding him, a faculty which Dr. Frankenstein is never quite able to master. This remains an obvious problem for Dr. Frankenstein, in fact, well into the book’s concluding chapters – his all-consuming, passionate, monstrous rage against his own creation causes him, unnecessarily, to leave his wife alone and unprotected just before her murder.

Forced into the role of an outsider by an unwelcoming society, the Monster unexpectedly becomes an effective and intuitive observer of interpersonal relation. When he commits a violent act, he does it not out of blind rage, but as a hopeful attempt at communication and, reluctantly, for fulfillment of a societal role: “I too can create desolation; my enemy is not impregnable; this death will carry despair to him” (97). Throughout the novel, the Monster strives not only to be understood, but also to understand. Dr. Frankenstein, on the other hand, becomes himself a self-imposed outsider to society – keeping himself apart from others through obsessive depravity and isolation, seeking to understand nothing but himself and, perhaps secondarily, his sciences.

What both characters come to realize by novel’s end is the dark and complex power of their own acquired knowledge. The Monster finds that human nature is perhaps as unforgiving and as impulsive as it presumes him to be, and Dr. Frankenstein learns (or at least considers) that scientific knowledge, no matter how grandiose, must be tempered with foresight and responsibility. There is, however, an important distinction between these characters’ respective treatment of their newfound knowledge. Where the Monster’s ultimate concern and pity are linked predominantly to the happiness he has
robbed from others – through the murders of William and Elizabeth and the framing of Justine, and even the death of Frankenstein himself, for which he holds himself responsible – the doctor’s continual and primary focus is on what a wreck his knowledge has made of his own life. One of his earliest statements to Walton, after the bulk of this drama has already occurred, introduces Frankenstein to the reader as a particularly self-pitying wretch of a man: “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” (16).

Initially a creature who had begrudgingly fallen into the role of villain simply because he routinely learned that it was expected of him, the Monster ultimately emerges as the most fully-realized “human” of this drama. Though he leaves Captain Walton at story’s end with a heavy heart, it is not due to an interest in the Monster’s own obsessions, but instead to his compassion for others and to a remorse for the pain he has brought them – a perspective which notably distinguishes him from his demented and deteriorated creator.