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The Monstrosity Within

What is considered monstrous? How are monsters contained? In Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*, these questions are not just answered – they are extended to other works, creating a basis for other gothic texts following this time. Mary Shelley crafts a novel that examines these gothic ideas that have been touched on, but not explored. Much of these ideas stemmed from Shelley's dark life itself, "The circumstances that gave birth to Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) read like something from a Gothic story in themselves. Mary's unconventional life up to the summer of 1816 (when she was still only 18), along with the company in which she found herself in June of that year – and even the unusual weather conditions at the time – all contributed to the book's genesis" ("Mary Shelley, Frankenstein and the Villa Diodati"). From this, *Frankenstein* was born. In *Frankenstein's* world, much can be considered monstrous, including physical monstrosity, the creature, and inner monstrosity, Victor Frankenstein; it is through the monstrous method of science and the acts of murder, creation, and exploration that lead to this conclusion of monstrosity in both characters. Furthermore, these depictions are what drives the act of containing the monster.

In the world of *Frankenstein*, the act of murder is monstrous, placing the creature as a monster in this story. This act of murder is *explicitly* seen through the physical monster that exists within this story, the creature, rendering him monstrous. Before the creature committed his

first real murder, he reflected on the process of it after being outcasted and hurt by the family he had been observing, “I could with pleasure have destroyed the cottage and its inhabitants, and have glutted myself with their shrieks and misery...There was none among the myriads of men that existed who would pity or assist me; and I should feel kindness toward my enemies? No: from that moment I declared everlasting war against the species, and, more than all, against him who had formed me, and sent me forth to this insupportable misery” (Shelley 121). This excerpt speaks well to the creature’s rage when he is exposed and made to feel monstrous; however, he does not blame his rage and cruel actions on himself, he accuses society and his creator, Victor Frankenstein, of making him an enemy to all. The creature’s reaction to this rage is what causes the action of murder, “I grasped his [William] throat to silence him, and in a moment he lay dead at my feet...I gazed on my victim, and my heart swelled with exultation and hellish triumph: clapping my hands, I exclaimed, ‘I, too, can create desolation; my enemy is not invulnerable; this death will carry despair to him, and a thousand other miseries shall torment and destroy him’” (Shelley 126). This murder is just one instance that categorizes the creature as monstrous, but what about Victor Frankenstein is considered monstrous?

Victor Frankenstein can be considered monstrous within this world due to the ways in which monstrosity is laid out for readers; for example, this is seen through the act of exploration he practices. His exploration is driven by his thirst for knowledge and desire to learn; however, it is this that eventually makes him monstrous. He explains the want of understanding the physical secrets of the world and what this study meant, “My temper was sometimes violent, and my passions vehement; but by some law in my temperature they were turned, not towards childish pursuits, but to an eager desire to learn, and not to learn all things indiscriminately...It was the

secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn; and whether it was the outward substance of things, or the inner spirit of nature and the mysterious soul of man that occupied me, still my enquiries were directed to the metaphysical, or, in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world” (Shelley 44). As a child, he was not drawn toward “childish pursuits,” but instead, this exploration of the metaphysical. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen references this same interest, and the danger of it, in his writing, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses).” He explains, “From its position at the limits of knowing, the monster stands as a warning against exploration of its uncertain demesnes,” and additionally, “that curiosity is more often punished than rewarded, that one is better off safely contained within one’s own domestic sphere than abroad...” (12). Cohen references the wonder that Victor Frankenstein feels, but explains that he, as a monster, is the warning against exploring the unknown too in-depth. As readers see, this proves to be a key element of Victor that leads to his downfall.

When analyzing *Frankenstein* for monstrosity, I feel it is more important to examine the elements of monstrosity that exist within Victor Frankenstein, a more implicit monster, than the creature. Furthermore, we can see more of Victor’s monstrosity through the method of science he employs, and his act of creation. Abigail Lee Six and Hannah Thompson touch on this in their piece, “From Hideous to Hedonist: The Changing Face of the Nineteenth-century Monster,” by recognizing what makes Victor internally monstrous, “Then it is Victor’s moral monstrosity – his excessive thirst for knowledge and the power which that promises, together with his readiness to sacrifice on such an altar those who love him (and whom he claims to love too); his Promethean arrogance in thinking he can steal the power of creation of a new species from God and the power to give birth from women – which is the cause of the creature's existence and that in turn,

arguably, is inseparable from its physical monstrosity” (240). Six and Thompson find Victor’s act of creating, and stealing powers from those before him, monstrous and dangerous. Similarly, it is this science of creating a living being that drives Victor to insanity, “As he [the professor] went on, I [Victor] felt as if my soul were grappling with a palpable enemy; one by one the various keys were touched which formed the mechanism of my being: chord after chord was sounded, and soon my mind was filled with one thought, one conception, one purpose. So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of Frankenstein, – more, far more, will I achieve: treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation” (Shelley 52-53). At a point in time, this creation is the sole purpose of Victor’s life, and once achieved, it became one of his biggest regrets.

So, why is this monstrosity important when analyzing this text? Mary Shelley does something new with this novel, *Frankenstein*, by creating two forms of monstrosity and placing them in conflict with one another, “*Frankenstein*, then, marks a turning-point in the representation of monsters in the Gothic mode, for whilst it does not eliminate the morally monstrous villain – he is alive and well in the title character – it introduces and pits him against a physically monstrous being, rather than the hapless damsels who had been his victims previously” (Six and Thompson 238-239). Shelley also illustrates the hardship of controlling monstrosity. What is the significance of the inability to contain a monster in this story? The physical monster, the creature, is unable to be controlled and is constantly moving – in isolation, of course – and this gives Victor Frankenstein a lot of worry when attempting to control what he cannot. Similarly, Victor’s monstrosity, seen in his exploration and creation, cannot be controlled either; he successfully executes the task of creating the creature. Cohen references this inability

to limit all monsters in his second thesis, “The Monster Always Escapes.” He explains the act of the monster’s escape, and the evidence that is left behind, “We see the damage that the monster wreaks, the material remains...but the monster itself turns immaterial and vanishes, to reappear someplace else...” (4). This inability to contain the monsters is what drives the plot of *Frankenstein*.

When thinking about our course, Victorian Monsters, this novel reveals something about what this particular culture views as some potential threats; this is one of the questions we have been studying in our course. It seems that Shelley, and the world of *Frankenstein*, view murder, creation, science, and exploration as threats to their society. Similarly, the inability to control these threats furthers this fear and, ultimately, creates a monster. This novel, specifically, explores two different monsters that pose threats to society in different ways. While the creature serves as a physically violent threat, Victor Frankenstein’s knowledge of science and drive to create a human being, can be considered a threat to the people around him. We recognize that these literary monsters serve as threats within their story, but do we face any real monsters within our society that threaten us? Cohen asks this same question of readers in his text, “Do monsters really exist? Surely they must, for if they did not, how could we?” (20). So, do they?

Works Cited

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