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Parental Negligence and its Role in Shaping *Frankenstein*

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Abstract:

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1918) is littered with social criticisms. Perhaps the most evident is the critique of parental negligence. Without this specific critique, *Frankenstein* would not be the novel it is. Shelley's inclusion of Victor Frankenstein's negligence is deliberate, as she uses it as a way to elicit sympathy for the creature from readers. Frankenstein's creature faces many challenges, but each challenge is a direct result of Frankenstein's decision to shun his creature. Frankenstein's negligence comes from a place of fear, and from his hunger for power. Because of the actions of his creator, the creature is left to suffer from a horrible life, which could have been prevented if the creature was given proper nourishment.

Keywords: Negligence, social, parent, violence.

In Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein creates what is essentially an adult-sized infant-like being, who is forced to learn to act like an adult in order to be accepted by the people he is living among. Left behind by his creator, the creature is left to fend for himself in a world he does not yet understand. As he tries to navigate his way through his new life, he faces many hardships and is treated cruelly by nearly every person with whom he comes in contact. The creature is abandoned by his creator, shunned by society for his appearance, and left to live a life of poverty. It is no accident that Shelley included such a wide variety of social problems for the creature to face. Each of the hardships the creature faces are tied to the social criticism of parental negligence.

Throughout the novel, it is evident that Frankenstein is the only person responsible for his creature's existence. In an essay by Marshall Brown entitled "*Frankenstein: A Child's Tale*," he claims Shelley's novel is based on her life and experiences, which to him do not hold much value because the author was "barely more than a girl when she conceived it" (Brown 145).

Although I disagree with Brown's idea that the creature is based on Shelley's own childlike mind, I still recognize that the creature is childlike. The first time the creature is introduced is when Frankenstein sees him in the mist and threatens him. The creature replies to Frankenstein's fear of him with, "Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us" (Shelley 72). In his response to Frankenstein, the creature reminds his creator that he is responsible for his creation. In a sense, the creature is Frankenstein's child, and Frankenstein should not just be able to disown him.

After years apart, the creature finds Frankenstein to let him know he is not free of his duty towards the creature. His response is threatening, unlike a child's might be, so by this point, the creature is not thinking like a child, but he is still assuming the role of Frankenstein's child. Although he threatens to kill his creator, the creature is not responsible for his monstrous behavior. If a human child was abandoned by his parent, nobody could blame him for being angry and upset, or even for wanting revenge in some way. Being abandoned is an emotional experience, and since the creature learned all he knows from other humans, Frankenstein should understand where his reaction is coming from. The creature does not react any differently to his situation than a human would because he learned to react by observing other humans.

Frankenstein's right to be angry and wish to abandon the creature a second time is not justified. If he had fulfilled his duty as the creature's creator in the first place, the creature likely would have never committed so many heinous acts in the first place. The creature's character can be compared to a homeless orphan in some ways. Left with no parents or guardians from the minute he was brought to life, the creature had no choice but to find his own way in the world. The only opportunity he had to do so was to watch other humans and imitate their behavior. Since the behavior he witnessed was cruel and violent, that is how he learned to act. If Frankenstein had accepted his role as a parent from the beginning, the creature could have been kind and loving. The creature would know of better ways to handle his emotions than resorting to violence, and if he did not, it would be the fault of his creator. All children need guidance, and the creature is no different. The fault of his creator's decision not to guide him should not rest on the creature's shoulders.

Not only do children crave structure and guidance, but they also desire love and acceptance. The creature, who is a child in his own way, is no exception to this inherent desire, and since he was not granted with it when he was brought to life, he decides to seek it out on his

own. Wanting friendship, the creature begins doing favors for the people in the cottage he is living near to. The creature remembers, “I found that the youth spent a great part of each day in collecting wood for the family fire; and, during the night, I often took his tools, the use of which I quickly discovered, and brought home firing sufficient for the consumption of several days” (Shelley 82). Since he has almost decided to give up hope on being accepted by others due to the harsh treatment he has received from strangers, the creature tries to be a friend from afar. Even if his neighbors cannot be friends to him, the creature decides to see what it would feel like if he could be a friend to them.

At first, this distant friendship works for the creature. He recalls, “When they were unhappy, I felt depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathized in their joys” (Shelley 83). The creature is figuring out on his own what it feels like to be someone’s friend. He is at his most childlike state when he is kind, compassionate, naturally loving, and longing to be loved. If Frankenstein had loved his creature, his creature would not have had to seek love elsewhere. If the creature was shown constant compassion by his creator, as a young child should be shown by his parent, he would have had the basis of what he needed to function and live successfully.

When he abandons his creature, Frankenstein does not think about the consequences. The creature is responsible for the burning down of a family’s cottage and the death of Frankenstein’s younger brother William, both as a result of his friendship being rejected. In Harriet Hurtis’s essay “Responsible Creativity and the ‘Modernity’ of Mary Shelley’s Prometheus,” she explores the idea that “[Shelley’s] novel explores the ethics of a male creator’s relationship to his progeny by questioning the extent to which he incurs an obligation for the well-being and happiness of that creation by virtue of the creative act itself” (Hurtis 846). As formerly discussed, Frankenstein does not feel a sense of duty towards his creature, which leads to Frankenstein abandoning him in the first place. Although Frankenstein offers no guidance to his creation, he is angry with the way the creature has turned out and the type of being he has become.

Upon first reuniting with the creature, Frankenstein hurls a slew of insults at him. “Wretch,” “too horrible for human eyes,” “devil,” and “vile insect” are all words Frankenstein uses to describe his creature the first time they come face to face after his creation (Shelley 72). If a parent were to speak to his child the way Frankenstein speaks to his creature, others would view him as an abusive parent. Furthermore, if any person treated a child with the same harshness that the creature is treated, his behavior would not be tolerated. Unfortunately, because

the creature is different, people have no problem treating him with such disdain. Frankenstein's actions, and the actions of the public, are not punished because nobody can understand the point of view of the creature. If he was only looked upon as a child, he would not suffer the torture and torment that he does from every person in the novel.

On top of being a negligent parent, Frankenstein is also a victim of toxic masculinity. Hurtis describes *Frankenstein* as “a masculinist narrative of patriarchal authority and (in)justice” (Hurtis 845). Frankenstein is a powerful and educated man. His education has given him success and a sense of authority, and he does not want those two aspects of his life to be challenged, especially by something he has created. Because of this, Frankenstein does everything he can to intimidate his creature. When his creature approaches him for the first time in the novel, Frankenstein threatens him, saying, “Do you dare approach me? And do you not fear the vengeance of my arm wreaked upon your miserable head? Begone, vile insect! Or rather stay, that I may trample you to dust” (Shelley 72). Without giving his creature any time to speak or explain why he has come back in the first place, Frankenstein speaks to him very violently and threatens his life. This shows, that although he will not admit it, Frankenstein is afraid of his creature. Frankenstein immediately resorts to violence to appear mightier and more masculine, and to hopefully scare away his creature.

Even when Frankenstein realizes he cannot scare his creature away, he still tries to intimidate him and assert his dominance. Frankenstein does this by acting cruelly to his creature, even when all the creature does is admit he wants someone to be his companion. The creature confesses to his creator, “If I have no ties and no affections, hatred and vice must be my portion; the love of another will destroy the cause of my crimes, and I shall become a thing, of whose existence every one will be ignorant” (Shelley 113). Once again, the creature is reiterating the fact that all he wants is love. Just like he wanted with William and the cottagers, he is looking for a friendship. Since he has learned that humans will not love him, the creature requests that Frankenstein creates another one of his kind to be his friend. The fact that the creature is willing to never have contact with any human for the rest of his life as long as his creator honors his request shows how desperate he is for someone to accept him.

Frankenstein accepts his creature's request, but he begins to have second thoughts when he is creating the female creature. After considering what could go wrong with the creation of his new creature, Frankenstein changes his mind. He remembers:

I thought with a sensation of madness on my promise for creating another like him, and, trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged. The wretch saw me destroy the creature on whose future existence he depended on for happiness, and, with a howl of devilish despair and revenge, withdrew. (Shelley 130)

Although Frankenstein meditates on what could go wrong before the destruction of his female creature, that may not be the main reason he makes the decision to destroy her. Before Frankenstein sees the creature watching him create the new creature, he is still debating whether it was the best idea for him to agree to her creation in the first place. It is not until he sees that the creature is waiting to meet his new companion that Frankenstein decides to ruin the chances of the creature ever having someone to love.

What is even more disturbing than Frankenstein's willingness to take away all of his creature's hope while being face to face with him is that Frankenstein notes the pain and anguish that can be heard in his creature's cry. Even when witnessing such raw emotion from his creature, Frankenstein still sees him as a monster and is happy with his decision to destroy his only chance at companionship. It is very probable that Frankenstein uses the destruction of the female creature as a way to assert his dominance over his living creature. Now that he realizes he is his creature's only chance at happiness, Frankenstein thrives on the idea that he holds so much power over the creature. Frankenstein's toxic masculinity and need to show power gets the best of him, and his creature is left to suffer the consequences.

A fascinating point to consider is that, while Frankenstein still tries to assert dominance over his creature, his creature has proven himself to be physically superior in every way. After being abandoned by his creator at birth, the creature was able to teach himself how to develop skills, like the ability to walk, talk, and sustain himself. Aside from teaching himself basic life skills, the creature has also proven to be violent and somewhat of a threat to mankind when he is treated unjustly. The creature has killed an entire family, and he has killed his creator's brother. Perhaps the reason Frankenstein feels the need to display his own power so obviously is because he is already aware of the power his creature holds, and this frightens him. The difference between Frankenstein's display of power and his creature's display of power is that the creature's actions are based on only what he has learned from other humans. Frankenstein's display of power, on the other hand, is based on his need to feel like the superior male figure in comparison

to his creature. By acting this way, Frankenstein abandons his parental role and only cares about his own needs.

Right after Frankenstein creates his creature, he is horrified at the sight of him. The creature must notice he is different, as he is described by his creator as having “yellow skin,” but many of his other physical attributes were “beautiful” (Shelley 37). This raises the possibility that everybody who fears the creature and treats him poorly only do so because of the color of his skin. Sure, he cannot yet speak, and he has other physical flaws, but he does not start off as a violent being, which does not leave much for the people he comes in contact with to fear. In his essay, “Frankenstein’s Monster and Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” H.L. Malchow argues, “Shelley’s portrayal of her monster drew upon contemporary attitudes towards non-whites” (Malchow 90). Although heartbreaking and unjust, the treatment of the creature from strangers and his own creator would make sense at the time if it was due to the color of his skin. Although Shelley never makes it clear whether her novel really is a social criticism of racism, it does not seem unlikely for nineteenth-century Britain. Malchow writes, “There is no clear proof that Mary Shelley consciously set out to create a monster which suggested, explicitly, the Jamaican escaped slave or maroon, or that she drew directly from any personal knowledge of either planter or abolitionist propaganda” (Malchow 92). He does, however, note that several authors that Shelley was familiar with at the time, including William Shakespeare, had modeled their characters after non-white people to illustrate the injustice that they face (Malchow 92).

While there is no reasonable evidence in Shelley’s text that would suggest Frankenstein’s creature is modeled after a slave, he does seem to deal with what could be seen as racism. Evidence that Frankenstein’s creature is “othered” in the novel can be seen very early on in the story. In one of his letters to his sister, Margaret Saville, voyager Robert Walton tells of a strange creature he and his shipmates beheld on their journey to the North Pole. He refers to this creature as a non-European “savage,” which shows his prejudice exists, whether it is conscious or not (Shelley 12). To Walton, if someone is European, it means they are good and approachable, but someone who is non-European is to be feared and avoided.

Not every comment about the creature’s differences from other beings are so subtle. When he is debating whether or not he should demolish the female creature in the making, Frankenstein refers to her as “one of [the creature’s] own species” (Shelley 129). In doing this, he is now explicitly Othering the creature, and judging him for the way he looks. Frankenstein

seems to have forgotten that the creature has only developed as a direct result of his own work. By this logic, and the logic that Frankenstein is somewhat a father to his creature, the creature is no different than his creator. As a descendant of his creator, it would not make sense to consider the creature to be of a different species than Frankenstein. Frankenstein's blatant disregard for his own creation is based on nothing other than the fact that his creature looks different than him

The natural connection between nature and the creature is a criticism of how unnatural humankind's rejection of and racism towards the creature is. Despite the harsh treatment from humans that the creature's uncommon appearance affords him, Mother Nature is kind to him. While the creature is left to survive on his own, his only home is in nature. He has no concrete home, which forces nature to become his home. Although the creature has not been taught about nature in any capacity, he takes to it rather quickly, and he knows how to navigate it on his own. While reflecting on his adjustment to the world around him, the creature remembers, "I gradually saw plainly the clear stream that supplied me with drink, and the trees that shaded me with their foliage" (Shelley 76). Even when his creator is not there to teach him how to live, the creature is able to learn from nature, as it welcomes him and helps him navigate his way through the world, which is so new to him.

Because of how well-educated Frankenstein is, he could have very easily given his creature an education. Frankenstein could have been the creature's educator, or at least fulfilled his duty as a guardian and enrolled his creature in school. In John Bugg's essay, "Master of Their Language': Education and Exile in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," he points out that the education of both characters has a lot to do with how they are perceived. Bugg writes, "My interpretive map will be Shelley's concern with education, especially the engagement of *Frankenstein* with race and empire in two of its narratives of education: the education of the Creature and the (other) education of Victor Frankenstein" (Bugg 657). The novel makes it extremely evident that education plays an important role in Frankenstein's life and success. Very early on in Shelley's novel, her readers are introduced to Frankenstein's college professors, and Frankenstein mentions his "schoolfellow," Henry Clerval, a significant character throughout the novel (Shelley 20). It is Frankenstein's education that gives him such prestige. Had he not been afforded the education he ultimately received, Frankenstein would not have been able to create his creature in the first place. Although Frankenstein had the opportunity to prosper academically, he did not give his creature the same courtesy. This brings back the question of

parental negligence. Since Frankenstein is responsible for the creature's existence, it only seems fair that he should make sure his creature gets a proper education. Since Frankenstein's name holds so much weight, it would likely be relatively easy for him to find someone to tutor his creature, as long as he explained the situation.

If the contest for best hero is between Frankenstein and the creature, the creature is the better contender. It is true that Frankenstein is capable of magnificent acts, as he created life one time and nearly accomplished it a second, but he is still lacking in compassion and sense of duty, traits that a traditional hero would exemplify. Frankenstein has abandoned his responsibility and left his creature to figure out how to live on his own, which is behavior that is less than heroic. The creature, on the other hand, is a perfect display of courage in the face of adversity. Even in the horrible conditions Frankenstein leaves him in, the creature learns to take care of himself.

It seems unfair that Frankenstein gets to be known as an accomplished scholar, and a fine man, while his creature is seen by everybody as a horrifying freak of nature. I believe the creature's unfortunate condition is a direct result of Frankenstein's negligence. It is probable that the community might view the creature differently if they knew that Frankenstein was the one who created him. There are two potential outcomes that I can think of regarding how people would react if they learned where the creature originated from. The first idea that comes to mind is that people would pity the creature. This seems to be the best possible scenario. If the creature could be related to a human that the public is familiar with, he might not seem as bad. If people knew he was neglected right from birth, they might feel sorry for him and want to help him. The second idea that comes to mind is that people would either fear or shun Frankenstein. It is possible that the community would be fearful of Frankenstein because they are so fearful of the creature. If everyone really does think the creature is such a threat, they might also see Frankenstein as a threat for creating him. If not, it is also possible that people would shun Frankenstein once they realized he neglected the creature. It is his negligence that led to the destruction the creature caused, and this would likely make people unhappy.

Unfortunately, the people in the community do not know the truth about where the creature came from. The creature is shunned for his differences, and people do not understand him. Shelley's ability to fit so many social criticisms into her novel elicits sympathy for the creature from the reader on many different levels. Without the negligence of his creator, the

Othering he experiences, and the type of education he receives, the creature would not be the same character, and *Frankenstein* would not be the same novel.

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