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## A Comparative Study of the Creator-Creature Relationship in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

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### **Abstract:**

Mary Shelley, in her novel *Frankenstein* reworks, even parodies, the Christian epic, *Paradise Lost*, mostly through her treatment of the relationship of a creator with his creation. Both tales of creation, rebellion, and abandonment, one is a verse classic, and the other is one of the finest Gothic novels ever written. This paper analyzes the way Mary Shelley fleshes out the relationship between *Frankenstein* and his monster, how that relationship often parallels the relationship between God and Satan, and how Shelley's Romantic ideology informs the narrative decisions apparent in her novel. Taking its cue from the epigraph of the novel, the paper charts this relationship through the entire narrative.

### **Keywords: Gothic, Monster, Creation, Motherhood/Fatherhood**

Mary Shelley, in her 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, uses lines from John Milton's canonical text *Paradise Lost* (1674) as her epigraph. This epigraph, along with the subtitle of the novel - 'the modern Prometheus' serves to fix her novel in a complex literary and mythical history. All three - *Frankenstein*, *Paradise Lost*, and the story of Prometheus - deal with creation myths. Using the pagan myth of Prometheus, and the Christian epic *Paradise Lost*, Shelley through her novel reworks and reconstructs both the myths, and at the same time raises questions about accountability, responsibility and duty between the creator and his creature. The relationship of *Frankenstein* with *Paradise Lost* however, is rather complex and double-voiced. Both the texts come from what can be called revolutionary times. *Frankenstein* appeared in the Romantic Age, a few decades after the French Revolution and in a time when the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity were much debated upon. *Paradise Lost*, published more than a century earlier, came after the English Civil War and Restoration. Both were times of great social upheavals, when the relationships between individuals and society and relationships among individuals were constantly being reassessed and questioned. Both these texts too deal with these themes. *Frankenstein*, in its assessment of human relationships, especially that of the creator-creature relationship shows many similarities as well as dissimilarities with *Paradise Lost*. Unlike the fixed set of relationships in *Paradise Lost* -- God as creator, Adam as obedient creature, Eve as his helpmate but also a creation of both Adam and God, and Satan as the fallen rebel, the relationships in *Frankenstein* are as unfixed as possible, with both

Victor Frankenstein and his creation constantly shifting between being Adam, Eve and Satan, even as Frankenstein initially projects himself as God, the Maker. This constant crossover between relationships can be traced in the novel through many overt as well as covert resemblances and distinctions that the characters themselves draw between their situation and those of Milton's characters. Towards the beginning of the novel when Victor dreams of his creating a new creature, he states his incentives as follows:

A new species will bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father should claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I shall deserve theirs.

(Frankenstein, 32)

Frankenstein in trying to appropriate God's work – Creation – not only becomes an erring Adam, who tries to access knowledge that is forbidden to him, but also in actually completing the act of creation and wanting what he calls the 'gratitude' that is due to him, becomes a 'God'-like figure himself, the figure of the Creator. Later, when he finds out that it is his creation whom he abandoned on the night of its coming into being, has caused the murders of his brother and of Justine, he exclaims:

I ... felt the never dying worm alive in my bosom...; I bore a Hell within me, which nothing could extinguish.

(Frankenstein, 59)

These lines are almost an exact echo of Satan, who when journeying towards Paradise says:

.... Which way shall I fly  
Infinite wrath and infinite despair?  
Which way I fly is Hell, myself am Hell...

(PL, IV 73-75)

Interestingly, the very same line is echoed by the 'monster' as well, and very self-consciously:

I, like the arch-fiend, bore a hell within me.

(Frankenstein, 96)

Thus, while Frankenstein implicitly compares himself to God, Adam as well as Satan, the 'monster' too subscribes to such comparisons. However, in his case these comparisons are not implicit but overtly stated. The 'monster' in his own words compares his situation to that described by Milton. A reason for this perhaps is that for him, *Paradise Lost* - the text, forms one of the entry points into the world. It is when living in the shed near the DeLacey cottage, when the 'monster' finds a collection of books, which he takes in and which form his introduction to the world, that he has been brought in. Among books like Plutarch's *Lives*, Goethe's *Sorrows of Werter*, what he most identifies with is *Paradise Lost*, which as he confesses he read 'as a true history.'

(Frankenstein, 91) It is his identification with Paradise Lost, that marks his understanding of his relationship with Frankenstein, his creator as well as with himself. As he says:

It moved every feeling of wonder and awe, that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting. I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own. Like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God, a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his creator;... but I was wretched, helpless and alone; many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me.

(Frankenstein, 91)

The ‘monster’ therefore, very consciously identifies with both Adam and Satan. Though it can be said that even Adam was not formed such a ‘perfect’ creature, since he was liable to gullibility and sin, his relationship with his creator, specially before the fall, is still an object of envy for the ‘monster.’ What he wants is to have such a relationship with Frankenstein. When he says to Frankenstein, ‘Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you’, (Frankenstein, 68) he is expressing his desire to be Adam to Frankenstein’s God, a desire which he later expresses in greater detail:

...I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and kind, if thou wilt perform thy part, the which thou owest me... I ought to be thy Adam: but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded....

(Frankenstein, 68)

Later, even his identification with Satan is exposed as only superficial, when realizing his own isolation and alienation from all of mankind, he ruefully states:

Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and detested.

(Frankenstein, 92)

The misery of the ‘monster’ is a result of the fact that he finds no correlative of himself even in a literary text which deals with a story quite similar to his. Even so, the fact that the ‘monster’ tries to forge for himself an identification with Milton’s text as a marker of his identity, is evidenced from his demand of Frankenstein to create a second ‘creature of another sex’ to be a companion for him in his solitude (Frankenstein, 103). This request is similar to Adam’s request to God in Paradise Lost when he reasoning ‘In solitude what happiness?’, requests God to create for him a companion, ‘fit for converse’ and a sharer of his solitude (PL, VIII 363-365). The

'monster' trying to identify with Adam or with Satan and failing to do so with either, haunted by the question 'What am I?' proceeds to question his creator. The monster's questions to Frankenstein, in a famous ploy by Shelley, of giving voice to the 'other' are what the epigraph to the novel anticipates.

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay  
To mould Me Man? Did I solicit thee

From darkness to promote me?

(Frankenstein, epigraph)

These lines describe Adam questioning God after his fall. As Burton Hatlen says, this moment of Adam questioning God is a moment of 'brutal understanding' for him. 'Brought into being without his request or consent, Adam has been commanded to love and obey his creator. Summoned to play a game governed by rules (all of them set by God) he does not understand, Adam is now to be punished for breaking these rules' (Hatlen 290). The monster's condition in Frankenstein is quite similar. Created by Frankenstein, and then ruthlessly abandoned, he sets out to demand of his creator reasons for such a desertion:

Cursed Creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even  
you turned from me in disgust?

(Frankenstein, 91)

Here are two examples of creatures, now abandoned, questioning their creators. However, there are many differences too. While Adam is being punished for express disobedience, the reason why Frankenstein abandoned his creation is never really given by even Frankenstein himself, except that looking at his creation 'filled him with horror and disgust.' (Frankenstein, 34) The monster's situation is therefore even more pitiable than that of Adam, who at least was abandoned for a tangible reason, however cruel or arbitrary the abandonment.

Another difference lies in how these questions by the creatures are followed up. The lines from Paradise Lost can be seen as being taken almost out of their original context by Shelley. Even though they do represent for Adam a moment of 'brutal understanding', that moment is very short-lived. Adam's questions are not only unanswered by God, they themselves segue into a confession of guilt and self-accusation. The lines chosen by the author as her epigraph are followed by:

..... Did I solicit thee

From darkness to promote me or here place

In this delicious garden? As my will

Concurred not to my being, it were but right

And equal to reduce me to my dust,

Desirous to resign and render back

All I received, unable to perform

Thy terms too hard by which I was to hold

The good I sought not...

..... Inexplicable

Thy justice seems! Yet to say truth too late

I thus contest.... Thy Reward was of His grace:

Thy punishment then justly is at His will.

Be it so, for I submit, His doom is fair:

(PL, X 743-769)

Adam's accusatory tone towards God is thus soon transformed into self-accusation as he calls his question only a 'proud excuse' (PL, X 749) and admits to himself that the logic by which God made him without his request or consent, also allows God to punish him without his consent. Frankenstein's 'monster' however, is not satisfied by any such self-consolation. Even though at the very end of the novel he confesses to Robert Walton that he too suffered intense guilt and remorse for causing his creator suffering, that guilt and remorse does not excuse Frankenstein from acting irresponsibly towards his creation; therefore, even for the monster, though Frankenstein's death is an occasion for great grief, it is not unjustified. He accuses his creator of being 'wanton' in bestowing him life and then abandoning him.

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... How dare you sport thus with life?

(Frankenstein, 67)

It is Frankenstein's callousness towards his creation who ought to be his responsibility that makes the monster's instinct of revenge justified, in so far as he is claiming vengeance for being abandoned, and at the same time also pitiable, as his vengeance is directed not only towards his father-creator, but also in a way towards himself, because it serves to make him more and more wretched as he goes along.

Shelley, therefore raises pertinent questions about the relationship of a creator to his creation and vice-versa. How responsible is a creator for a being that he has generated and how guilty is he of abandoning him? - these are questions that Frankenstein deals with in relation to Paradise Lost.

Mary Shelley, through her novel however, does not only perform a revolutionary reading of Paradise Lost; she also works towards bringing out the revolutionary elements latent in Paradise Lost itself, specially vis-à-vis the creator-creature relationship. Such an impulse behind the novel is, as Anjana Sharma calls it, 'in large part historical' (xxvii). Shelley's husband and friends were most of them Romantics, a group that is associated with a radical rereading of Milton's epic, a text that they appropriated to further the Romantic ideology. Influenced by the writings of Voltaire and Rousseau, specially Rousseau's ideas of individual liberation and noble savagery which inspired the French Revolution, the Romantics set out to read in Paradise Lost a revolutionary impulse, a radical ideology hidden under but not completely obscured by

Milton's overt reinforcement of the traditional ideas of obedience and duty towards authority. This revolutionary impulse was seen by them primarily in the character of Satan, whom Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley's husband, called the 'true' hero of *Paradise Lost*, even though flawed (Hatlen 287). Percy Shelley saw Satan as a 'moral being far superior to his God, as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture' (Hatlen 287). Satan rebelled against God's assumption of supreme authority in Heaven because, as the Romantics saw it he 'saw no reason for that inequality of rank and power which the creator assumed' (Hatlen 286). Such a revolutionary impulse, even though most evident in Satan, can also be seen in God's other creations – Eve, too works towards subverting authority of both Adam and of God, proved most of all by her act of eating the apple. In Adam too, such fleeting impulses of revolution can be seen, such as in the lines Mary Shelley uses as the epigraph to her novel. What Mary Shelley seems to play upon is the Romantic assessment of Milton's text, summarized by Blake as Milton being 'of the devil's party without knowing it' (Hatlen 286). In *Frankenstein*, Shelley displays an inclination to 'subject to a ruthless critique all forms of inequality and arbitrary power' (Hatlen 286) something the that the Romantics believed Milton, unknowingly, was doing. Milton's latent sympathy for the rebel is played upon by Shelley's overt sympathy for the monster, in no way undercut by her sympathy towards Frankenstein himself.

It is not only a Romanticized version of Milton's epic that Shelley provides in her novel. In her own way, she also questions and subverts what Hatlen calls 'the patriarchal mythos of creation' (285). In *Paradise Lost*, like in the Bible, all generative power is seen as primarily male, with the woman only serving as a vessel. In her novel, Shelley seems to be exposing the 'monstrosity' inherent in the idea of such a male-motherhood. As Hatlen expounds, 'that male motherhood is inherently monstrous is apparent, in the inability of the patriarchal creator, whether God or Frankenstein, to create the kind of being he sets out to create (In so far as their creations are not exactly in their images but rather inferior versions of them)... Furthermore, it issues exclusively from the will rather than the heart... purely out of a need to demonstrate his (the creator's) mastery over the process of nature' (293). Such a patriarchal prerogative of creation, which aims not at nurturing or giving life to a being but only at possessing an inferior being over whom he can exercise power, is inherently monstrous. This is opposed to the notion of female-motherhood, which for Shelley is the only right kind of creation. Female-mothers, however, are interestingly absent in the novel, thus adding to the atmosphere of monstrosity and unnaturalness. All mother and surrogate mother-figures – Caroline, Elizabeth, Justine – are killed off in the novel, leaving no female generative power, and consequently leaving no hope for a creator-creation relationship which can be in any way beneficial or nurturing. The male creator, since his impulse behind creation is plain self-glorification, is cruel and incompetent towards a creation which he sees as inferior. The female creator on the other hand, is guided not by an impulse of

glorification but of responsibility towards her creation whom she sees not only as a part of herself, but as a living being in its own right and thus deserving of a free life. The male creator on the other hand, such as in the case of God, but even more so in Frankenstein, demands full gratitude and obedience without assuming any other responsibility than creation. As Hatlen says: 'the creature, launched upon the world as a free being is nevertheless expected to do nothing contrary to the will of the creator. The creature is in fact simultaneously an autonomous self and an extension of the creator, and these two dimensions of his existence are absolutely incompatible' (295).

Both Frankenstein and God assume such a stance towards their creations. Frankenstein expects gratitude from his creation and that is why holds him guilty of murdering his loved ones, ignoring the harm he himself had inflicted by abandoning the creature, who on his creation was a 'tabula rasa' in the Lockean sense, thereby wholly susceptible to the impressions his formative years will leave on him. An implicit critique of the patriarchal creator is therefore present in Shelley's novel. As the Romantics detected in Milton a half-hidden impulse of 'putting God on trial before man's idea of justice', Shelley too sets out to do what the Romantics think Milton wanted to do: 'she puts the patriarchal creator on trial, and she finds him guilty' (Hatlen 292). That Shelley performs such a reading of the creator-creature relationship, is also a consequence of biographical facts. Shelley, whose radical-feminist mother died soon after giving birth to her, lived most of her life with a father, who as many sources have reported, was as best indifferent to her (Sharma xiii). The sense of abandonment and isolation that the creature feels in the absence of a mother figure, therefore seems to be an autobiographical echo of Shelley's own relationship with her father.

The creature-creator relationship in Frankenstein, is perhaps also a somewhat secularized version of that in Paradise Lost. Unlike in Paradise Lost, the creation in Frankenstein is in no way a divine act. Instead, it is a process making use of natural sciences, most steps of which even disgust the creator, especially when he has to go collect bones and organs from charnel-houses and exhumed graves. There is no forbidden knowledge at stake, except that which Frankenstein makes use of in the act of creation. The monster is given no divine instructions on how to conduct himself. Instead, he has to make way for himself when he is abandoned by his creator. The act of creation moreover is not only secularized, it is also demystified in the sense that it is no act of a glorious coming into being, but a 'filthy' scientific experiment done furtively in ramshackle workshops and attics. Unlike Milton's God, who can still justify punishing Adam because he had actually ordered Adam not to touch the forbidden fruit, Frankenstein, in a much more cruel manner is so disgusted by his creation that he does not deem it worthy enough of even being looked at by him.

Both Frankenstein and Paradise Lost therefore are canonical texts dealing among other themes with the theme of the creator-creature relationship. Frankenstein can be seen as a rereading or parody or reconstruction of Paradise Lost



from a female point of view as well as from the point of view of the “other”, the “subaltern” or the creature. The characters of Frankenstein and his monster share many similarities as well as dissimilarities with God, Adam as well as Satan. Through such a complex intertextual relationship, Shelley succeeds in raising pertinent questions about the ideas of responsibility, duty and accountability inherent not only in the relationship between the characters of her novel but in the relationships between characters in Milton’s epic too.

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