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Grief, Isolation, and the Restorative Potential of Friendship in *Frankenstein*

A reader can trace the rise and fall of Frankenstein by tracing the ebb and flow of his connections with man and nature. At the novel's outset, Frankenstein is snugly situated in a family unit built upon reciprocal love. His family checks and constructively diverts his ambition. When he leaves home, he is increasingly consumed by his thirst for knowledge and dominion; this thirst compels him to all but sever his family ties as he seeks the ultimate power: that of bestowing life. The monster his efforts spawn becomes a grotesque embodiment of the mindset under which it was created: it is superhumanly powerful, and utterly bereft of human connection. In a concrete sense, the monster magnifies the parallels between itself and its creator by breaking that creator's every bond of human affection, until Frankenstein is as isolated as the monster. The guilt the monster's actions engender in Frankenstein further catalyzes the doctor's desolation, exiling him to an inner hell of shame in which human connection is impossible. Ultimately, the figurative umbilical cord between the monster and its maker is each's only remaining living contact. But in framing the narrative within the budding friendship between Frankenstein and Walton, Shelley offers, if not to Frankenstein himself, certainly to Walton and to the reader, a redemption from the hell of isolation which permeates so much of the piece.

The hope of the narrative frame revolves around grief's potential to bring about sympathy, and thereby foster, rather than inhibit, human connection. Frankenstein's parents' marriage exemplifies such a transformation of suffering, and Frankenstein reaps the benefits of said transformation. Frankenstein's father grows "bitter" when his friend Beaufort succumbs to a

“false pride which led him to a conduct so unworthy of the affection that united them” (17), but Beaufort’s daughter Caroline’s “courage...in her adversity” as she cares for Beaufort imbues Frankenstein’s father with a “desire to be the means of, to some degree, recompensing her for the sorrows she had endured.” This desire brings about the marriage of the two, and lends “inexpressible grace to [Frankenstein’s father’s] behavior to [Caroline, Victor mother].” In this way, Beaufort’s grief produces “a very mine of love” from which Frankenstein’s parents “draw inexhaustible stores of affection...to bestow...upon [Frankenstein]” (19).

The love within this mine naturally extends to Elizabeth, whose otherworldly beauty makes her something of a foil to the monster. Elizabeth is described as being “as of a different species, a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features” (20). Of course, the monster is, in a sense, of another species himself, and Frankenstein would have liked to have endowed the creature’s features with a celestial stamp. As a worldly being, though, the doctor has no such stamp; or, if he does (by virtue of being part and parcel of God, as Blake might have it), he is barred from access to it by the all-consuming self-absorption that seizes him as he forms the monster. Consequently, the monster’s features assume a hellish aspect, which places them in stark contrast to Elizabeth’s.

There is a similarly marked disparity, needless to say, between the respective temperaments of Elizabeth and the monster, particularly with respect to Victor. Elizabeth embodies “the living spirit of love to soften and attract” (23), and she “subdue[s] [Frankenstein, and his ambitions] to a semblance of her own gentleness” (24). She “makes the doing good the end and aim of [Clerval’s] soaring ambition,” and presumably tries, if she tragically fails, to

similarly direct Victor's passion. On the other hand, the monster, as previously suggested, grotesquely represents Frankenstein's "violent temper and vehement passions" (23) in their most aggravated degree. Yet Victor "look[s] upon Elizabeth as mine with a childishness seriousness"; "til death," he says, "she was to be mine only." He takes similar ownership of the monster during the process of creation, but immediately disowns the creature upon beholding its ugliness. Nonetheless, the monster, as has been mentioned and will be explored further later, is irrevocably bonded to Frankenstein, and willing to follow him halfway around the world. Elizabeth, in contrast, is snatched away from Victor just after the pair has made legally binding vows that renew Victor's childhood sentiments.

At any rate, the love Victor's parents lavish upon their children undoubtedly evinces "a deep consciousness of what they owed toward the being[s] to which they had given life" (19). Victor hardly shares such a consciousness with respect to his creature. We may assume, then, that the lineage of love has been corrupted somehow. The next few paragraphs will examine the changes Frankenstein undergoes as he creates the monster.

When Frankenstein, "who had ever been surrounded by amiable companions, continually engaged in endeavoring to bestow mutual pleasures" (30), leaves his family, he severs his ties to everything outside himself, save his creature. "I wished to procrastinate, as it were, all that related to my feelings of affection," he says. His eyes become "insensible to the charm of nature" (39); he does not once visit Geneva.

His newfound aloneness gives him the rope he needs to hang himself by "penetrating into the recesses [or "hiding places"] of nature and...mock[ing] the invisible world with her own

shadows” (33). His “examin[ation of] the causes of life” leads him to meditate upon death, to “study how the fine form of man was degraded and wasted” (37). Thus, he becomes acquainted with the “supernatural horrors” of “darkness” from which he had hitherto been protected by his father (36). The invisible world mocks him as much as he mocks it, and “often [his] human nature turn[s] with loathing from [his] occupation” (39).

With his mind consumed by death, his efforts to “animate the lifeless clay” begin to “torture the living animal [i.e. himself, especially his physical form]” (39): “sometimes,” he admits, “I grew alarmed at the wreck perceived that I had become” (41). His selfishness approaches delusion: “No father could claim the gratitude of his child,” he declares, “so completely as I should deserve [my creature’s]” (38-39). And yet, it is he who works “like one doomed by slavery to toil in the mines” (41), he who is “sustained” by “the energy of my purpose alone” (41). These are the first of a number of figures which demonstrate a slave-like codependency between Frankenstein and the monster. Indeed, Victor’s creation, by all rights, owes him a debt of gratitude; but by the same rights, Frankenstein owes the monster the affection and support that naturally flows between a parent and a child.

Upon completing the monster, though, “the beauty of the dream vanish[es] and horror and disgust fill[s] my heart...No mortal could support the horror of [the monster’s] countenance” (42-43). In hindsight, why should the doctor have expected anything different? The creature is the product of innumerable hours of meditation upon the decay of the human form: if the process of creation made one’s human nature recoil in disgust (39—see above), why should not the result do the same? Just as any work of art absorbs, to some degree, its creator’s state of consciousness,

so too this monster ought to take on the isolation, squalor, and obsessiveness Frankenstein imposed upon himself while animating the creature.

The guilt Frankenstein feels after having created such a repulsive creature drives him further from his friendships. Seeing Clerval elicits in Frankenstein “thoughts [of] my father, Elizabeth, and all the scenes of home so dear to my recollection” (44). Clerval, then, becomes a kind of symbol of the doctor’s deepest human ties. Still, Frankenstein “could never persuade myself to confide in him that event which was so often present to my recollection but which I feared the detail to another would only impress more deeply” (52). The secrecy the doctor maintains about the monster creates distance between him and his loved ones, and causes his guilt to fester internally: “I felt,” he laments, “as if I had no right to claim [my family’s] sympathies—as if never more could I maintain companionship with them” (128).

Yet even within this isolated hell of grief—which burgeons into a fever of madness—there is space for the redemptive powers of friendship. Frankenstein declares that “nothing but the unbounded and unremitting attentions of my friend [Clerval] could have restored me to life” following the aforementioned fever (46). In hearing Frankenstein’s tale, Walton may offer him a similar restoration, a deliverance from the secrecy and guilt which have corroded his friendships. Indeed, Walton seeks to “ameliorate Frankenstein’s fate” by listening to his story. In reciprocation, Frankenstein may save Walton, not only by extending the hand of friendship Walton so longs to grasp (“I have one want...I have no friend,” Walton laments [4]), but by providing a cautionary tale, which ultimately compels Walton, who undoubtedly shares, to some

degree, Frankenstein's dangerous inclination toward all-consuming ambition, to turn his ship around, despite Frankenstein's own objections.

When the monster begins to perpetrate murders, the agony of guilt preys all the more on Frankenstein, and separates him not only from his family, but from the whole of the human race: "I saw an insurmountable barrier between myself and my fellow men," he says, "and that barrier was sealed by the blood of William and Justine" (137). Indeed, it seems fitting that the doctor, in his madness, "call[s] himself the murderer of William and Justine, and of Clerval" (155). Elsewhere, though, Frankenstein denies culpability: "I was guiltless," he says on page 141, "but I had indeed drawn down a horrible curse upon my head, as mortal as that of crime." Frankenstein is justified in claiming a certain amount of "guiltlessness," for he cannot be expected to have anticipated the destruction the monster would wreak, but the fact remains that the doctor is the first link in the causal chain that leads to the deaths of his family and friends .

Every bit of guilt and misery the monster inflicts upon Frankenstein plagues the monster himself, tenfold. "He," the monster cries, meaning Frankenstein, "suffered not in the consummation of the deed [this deed could be any one of the monster's murders, and/or the act of creating the monster—the consummation of the latter act would be the monster's life, which Frankenstein suffers only indirectly]. Oh! Not the ten-thousandth part of the anguish that was mine during the lingering of its execution" (195).

A peculiar reciprocity, or link of identity, then, exists between Frankenstein and the monster: Frankenstein carries the guilt brought about by the monster's actions, and the monster writhes under the misery he causes Frankenstein. In a sense, the monster is Frankenstein and

Frankenstein is the monster. Frankenstein calls the creature a “monstrous image which I... endowed with the mockery of a soul still more monstrous” (161). If “mockery” is taken to mean “an object of ridicule,” then the soul mentioned is the monster’s, which is an object of ridicule and is “more monstrous” than the “image,” or body, of the monster. But, if a mockery is a bastardized imitation, then the “mockery” that is the monster’s soul must be a reflection, or image, of some “still more monstrous” soul—presumably, Frankenstein’s.

As the piece comes to a close, a kind of mutual dependence develops between the monster and Frankenstein. The latter declares that his thirst to take revenge upon the creature “is the devouring and only passion of my soul” (177); “revenge alone,” he says later, “endowed me with strength and composure” (179). In this way, Frankenstein’s quest for vengeance becomes the only thing that allows (or, perhaps, forces) him to maintain his life; thus, the doctor is dependent upon the creature as much as upon oxygen or water. The creator’s dependence upon the creature inverts the natural order.

A similar inversion can be seen in the monster’s “enslavement” of Frankenstein. Natural law dictates that a creator—a father, if you like—ought to have authority over his creation or son. At the same time, a father is bound to his son by certain duties; Frankenstein’s neglect of those duties compels the monster to exact vengeance, and Frankenstein is helpless as his family and friends are torn away from him. Naturally, then, he appears obligated to fulfill the monster’s demand for a mate: in the words of the monster himself, “Slave [i.e. Frankenstein],[...]you are my creator, but I am your master; obey!” (146).

Yet, when Frankenstein refuses to “obey,” the monster can only “gnash his teeth in the impotence of anger” (146). He calls his creator “my tyrant and tormentor” (146). Certainly, the monster is enslaved to Frankenstein insofar as Frankenstein “cast [him] amongst mankind” (60) to be abused and ridiculed and plagued by every imaginable affliction. Frankenstein gave the monster life, and that life binds—or, if you will, enslaves--the monster to his own miserable existence. Moreover, just as Frankenstein’s search for vengeance keeps him alive at the end of the novel, so too, though Frankenstein has “blasted my [the monster’s] other passions, revenge remains—revenge, henceforth dearer than light or food!” (146). The mutual dependence between the monster and Frankenstein is confirmed when the monster, upon his creator’s death, pledges suicide.

The monster is a living embodiment of Frankenstein’s self-absorption and excessive ambition. It is fitting, then, that the creature should—both literally, through murder, and figuratively, through guilt—tear apart Frankenstein’s friendships, and that, in the end, the polarized bond between the doctor and his creation is the sole sustenance of both parties involved. Still, throughout the piece, we see evidence of the restorative powers of friendship: Frankenstein’s father rescues his wife from grief; Clerval and Elizabeth (along with Frankenstein’s father, etc.) repeatedly try to restore Frankenstein to health and happiness; and a “spirit of good” comprised of the spirits of Frankenstein’s friends “follows and directs” Frankenstein as he pursues the monster (181). The friendship between Walton and Frankenstein, in which the narrative is framed, offers its own brand of “redemption through sympathy.” *Frankenstein* explores the depth of human affections, the ways in which self-absorption can exile

one from those affections, and the potential of those very affections to deliver one from said exile.

Works Cited

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, Walter James Miller, and Harold Bloom. *Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus*. New York: New American Library, 2000. Print.