Detrimental Effects of Absence in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein

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Assignment Description: Make and defend a claim about Frankenstein, then use both your own evidence/analysis and source materials to defend that claim.

The major theme of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein is uncovered in the exchange between the creature and a blind man. During their conversation, the creature says, “I trust that by your aid, I shall not be driven from the society and sympathy of your fellow creatures” (Shelley 94). To which the blind man replies, “Heaven forbid! Even if you were really a criminal; for that can only drive you to desperation, and not instigate you to virtue” (94). Shelley avows that society and sympathy are vital for a person’s well-being, without which a person would despair and because “virtue is a capacity that must be exercised in conjunction with others and is stifled in isolation” (Bernatchez 208), the opportunity to exercise virtue becomes practically non-existent to the one excluded from society and sympathy. The blind man is Shelley’s chosen messenger for her theme, because he can be trusted. Readers are conditioned by Shelley to trust the blind man before the creature has ever interacted with him through the creature’s account of the old man’s virtues and his belief that the man’s blindness will prevent him from rejecting the creature based on sight. This theme is so important to Shelley that she reinforces it by causing Victor to mirror the creature’s experience, doubling the impact of her message.

Shelley’s novel demonstrates the systematic dismantling of opportunities for the creature to experience society and sympathy through various acts of oppression and lack of knowledge afforded to recognized members of the human race. The entire account of his existence is laced with instances where the lack of society and sympathy have robbed him of essential elements needed to develop the character for a virtuous life. First of all, the creature’s birth experience is likened to a mother who, after the birth of her child, casts that child from her and refuses to feed it. Victor refused to parent his ugly baby, leaving the creature to fend for himself. He is “abandoned at birth and viewed throughout strictly as expendable by his creator” (Vlasopolos 132). Victor’s abandonment of his offspring becomes the first act of civilized oppression perpetrated against the creature, because, according to Jean Harvey, “Civilized oppression … often involves acts of omission” (14). The creature enters the world of men alone, with no one to guide him, no one to protect him, feed him or give him understanding. He is denied society and sympathy because of his appearance. Upon his first encounter with a human being, the old man “shrieked loudly, and, quitting the hut, ran across the fields with a speed of which his debilitated form hardly appeared capable” (Shelley 72). By the time the creature is rejected by a crowd of village people his trust has begun to dissipate. He is unjustly excluded, not “as a consequence of his crimes … but as a result of his appearance” (Vlasopolos 132). At this point in his experience, the creature has been exposed to abandonment, rejection based on appearances, and “othering,” where a being is judged to be less than human because he or she is different from the expected norm.
Trust plays an important role in the development of society and sympathy, and exclusion undermines trust. "Mutual orientation and trust have become essential to interaction. It is a process of overcoming the difference through reciprocity, rather than creating difference through exclusion" (Rawls and David 470). When the give and take of interaction occurs, the opportunity for resolving differences also occurs. Interactions allow people to prove their trustworthiness (475). The creature's exclusion from any interaction at all harms his ability to trust and denies him the right to provide evidence of his good will by virtuous acts.

The creature is able to observe reciprocity demonstrated between the members of the De Lacey household when the old man's children "performed towards him every little office of affection and duty with gentleness; and he rewarded them by his benevolent smiles" (Shelley 76), but he is excluded from that reciprocity, society and sympathy, and the situation weighs heavily upon him to the point that he decides to do something about it. He, as a fledgling creature, has no understanding of the unspoken communication between men. His features are grotesque, unable to express recognizable human emotion. Even Victor's encounters with his creation only mention the creature's ghastly grin. Russell Blackford argues that "our successful day-to-day interaction with each other involves the continual reciprocation of understanding, concern and respect" which is communicated by universally recognized facial expressions which the creature is unable to mimic (533). The result of the creature's inability to communicate non-verbally constitutes another barrier to society and sympathy. Blackford goes on to say, "At the individual level, a human being who lacked the normal repertoire of emotional expression, or the normal psychological capacity to understand it, would be severely disadvantaged" (533).

Throughout the latter part of the creature's voyeuristic association with his cottagers, he experiences tension between the knowledge of his exclusion from normal relations with humans and the lack of knowledge of what to do about it. His knowledge of language and reading increases over time but so does his dissatisfaction. From Milton's Paradise Lost, which he believes to be an actual account, the creature becomes aware of his inferior status in the grand scheme of things when he says, "Like Adam, I was created apparently by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far 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; he was allowed to converse with, and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature: but I was wretched, helpless and alone" (Shelley 90). He has no father to correct his self-image, no one to direct and refine his reasoning skills. Carol Hay postulates that "lack [of] access to formal education" can affect people's ability "to develop various analytical reasoning skills" (28). The creature's reasoning is at the mercy of his belief, spawned by oppression, that he is inferior to man when exterior oppression invades his interior and he begins to believe in the negative stereotype that the oppressor has painted of him, becoming stunted in self-development and self-esteem as a result (Harvey 18). The creature's waking life is a hell of conflict, and although he feels an overwhelming affection for his cottagers, the contrast between his status and opportunities and theirs reinforces his low self-esteem. At night, however, he can fight the negative self-images through dreaming. In his dream
world, he can imagine a life of acceptance. The creature explained his dream life in this way – “I looked upon them [the cottagers] as superior beings, who would be the arbiters of my future destiny. I formed in my imagination a thousand pictures of presenting myself to them, and their reception of me. I imagined that they would be disgusted, until, by my gentle demeanor and conciliating words, I should win their favor, and afterwards their love” (Shelley 79). His dreams were probably the healthiest thing he could have for himself at this time, for they allowed him to “reflect quite a lot about who he would be if the freedom and fair opportunity existed” (Harvey 20). The creature attempted to redefine his negative self-image by adopting the virtues he perceived his cottagers and book heroes to have. Unfortunately, several factors undermined him. One factor was that he had acquired knowledge, but his emotions ruled him. Throughout the text, he speaks of his feelings. Had he been raised by a father, he would have been taught to master his emotions, not vice versa. The other factor that undermined him was the inability to account for natural fears of even virtuous people, like his cottagers, in seeing an eight foot man in close proximity.

The creature’s encounter with his cottagers terminates in disaster, and it is the end of his attempts to identify with humanity. His ability to think rationally is severely impaired as evidenced by his plan to kidnap Victor’s brother, William, and to force him to overcome any revulsion he felt upon seeing the creature’s face. The creature was definitely acting irrationally when he murdered the child for opposing him. Carol Hay lists three sources that harm a person’s ability to think rationally – trauma, neglect, and oppression (24). The creature was exposed to all three sources. He had just been traumatized by being rejected by a family he loved, had been neglected by his creator, and had constantly been subjected to the by-products of oppression. When the creature met William on the path, he was partially recovered from a gunshot wound which he received from an angry human after he had tried to rescue a girl from drowning. Hay argues that an experience such as that would affect him when she says, “The terror or trauma oppressed people can experience when they face violence, or even the threat of violence, can also impair their rational capacities” (25).

Revenge against his creator almost completely replaces rational thought. However, there is one more attempt made to gain the prize of society and sympathy. The creature must appeal to his maker. Unfortunately, the creature does not find an outward show of sympathy that he needs to see from Victor, due to his involvement in the deaths of William and Justine. He has proven himself to be untrustworthy by his destructive actions. The creature appeals to Victor’s sense of justice - “You had endowed me with perceptions and passions, and then cast me abroad an object for the scorn and horror of mankind. But on you only had I any claim for pity and redress, and from you I determined to seek that justice which I vainly attempted to gain from any other being that wore the human form” (Shelley 98). In order to be just, Victor must create a mate for the creature that would give him the society and sympathy he craves. Although Victor agrees to the project, he reneges, which precipitates a killing spree on the part of the creature. The second part of Shelley’s theme for this novel is realized. Separation from society and sympathy does “not instigate [him] to virtue” (Shelley 94).

You will recall that I claimed Shelley reiterated her theme in Victor’s experience.
It is at this point in the novel, when Victor has ripped the bride of the creature apart limb from limb, that his experience begins to mirror that of his creature. Heightened revenge rules the creature, who decides to wipe all traces of society and sympathy from Victor’s life, leaving Victor to experience the same pain that the creature has lived with all his life. He begins by killing everyone who is dear to Victor – Clerval and Elizabeth – except for Victor’s father who dies shortly from grief. Victor’s entire existence has been supported by the sympathy of his loved ones as evidenced by the tone of the many letters written to him and found within the pages of the novel. Now Victor has no one who will sympathize with him – no one to take his troubles to. Even a magistrate in whom he confides the particulars of creature’s actions does not sympathize with him, and he leaves his presence in disgust. Victor becomes just like the monster in singleness of purpose. He will have his revenge. One of the most telling lines in the novel in regards to this argument is when Victor tells Walton, “Swear that he shall not triumph over my accumulated woes, and live to make another such a wretch as I am” (Shelley 150). In this statement, Victor is admitting that creature and he are mirror images of one another. They are both creators, having made wretches of one another and withdrawing the only things that would lead them to virtue – the positive interaction, society and sympathy of others. Victor even resembles the creature in his behavior when he is dying. Shelley wrote, “Sometimes he commanded his countenance and tones, and related the most horrible incidents with a tranquil voice, suppressing every mark of agitation, then, like a volcano bursting forth, his face would suddenly change to an expression of the wildest rage, as he shrieked out imprecations on his persecutor” (151).

Society and sympathy are vital elements for the promotion of emotional well-being, rational thought, and virtuous living. The importance of this theme to the structure of *Frankenstein* is apparent by its absence in the life of the creature, and by the consequences resulting from its exclusion. Society and sympathy are a treasured human birthright that Victor took for granted and that the creature craved and envied. His attempts to sever Victor from society and sympathy were only partially successful, because once Victor had experienced these, he could relive the experience at any time in his mind. The creature was never that fortunate. His dreams were only make-believe.
Works Cited


