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Frankenstein Meets Maslow

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Abstract

“Frankenstein Meets Maslow” details the academic exchange between colleagues (an English and a Nursing professor) when an English student writes a cross-disciplinary analysis of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, within the framework of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Once the dialogue begins, academic boundaries blur, pedagogy blends, and innovative insightful discourse ensues.

Those of us who teach literature-based developmental English often read our student essays in an almost semi-conscious, if not an auto-pilot state, fully expecting the traditional approach and ‘freshman’ interpretation of the steady, well worn classics we assign. Therefore, in literature survey courses or undergraduate baseline genre courses, we expect the pedantic evaluations that border on plot review with the insipid, stock, biographical references that may or may not be relevant. We have also come to expect the obvious interpretations that are conducive to the respective text, ones that may be absolutely accurate, but quite predictable, those repetitions of character, theme, landscape, or treatment that offer no thought or imagination but present merely what ‘they’ think we require. But once in awhile, there is that innovative essay that offers more than the obvious, one that transcends not only the assignment and its genre but the designated course of study, one that takes the student essay to a new level of thought, and one that encourages academic exchange between colleagues. Once in awhile there is that one student essay that inspires, illuminates, and yes, teaches the well-worn teacher.

In my Summer 2002 English course (sequential composition that incorporates thematic literature), freshman students were asked to submit an in depth interpretation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Predictably, most students rushed to examine:

1. *The ‘mad’ scientist* - Dr. Frankenstein who creates a being from body parts of assorted dead beings and who is so engrossed in his project that he withdraws from society and systematically deteriorates physically as well as emotionally. This perspective may also include an ethical look at religion vs. science, the scientific ego, and the God-complex.

2. *Isolation* - clearly in one level of the novel, the protagonist, Dr. Frankenstein is isolated within his realm of creation; also isolated are the characters left at home: Dr. Frankenstein’s family, friends, and betrothed, Elizabeth. In another level of the novel, once the monster is ‘born,’ he is left to fend for himself; even those rustic characters he meets in his journey are isolated in one way or another. And finally, in the ‘outer’ level of the triad narrative, Robert Walden is isolated at sea, apart from his sister, who is left formulaically at home.

3. *Abandonment* - Victor immediately abandons his creation; this action culminates in the victimization of Victor’s family and friend; ‘sane’ life as we know it is lost as we observe the monster abandoning his civility, with creator and creation ultimately doomed.

4. *Revenge* - the student will often gravitate to this ‘simple’ topic as it is recognizable and an often justifiable emotion. The respective arguments that detail who gets revenge and for what reason often proves interesting, but this topic is trite and tired.

Of course, I am generalizing, and there are more treatments and many variations; but for the most part, essays from class to class and semester to semester are hardly earth shattering. Yet, that summer, one dynamic essay dared to link the fundamentals of a humanistic psychological theory to traditional literary content. And it worked; in fact, it 'rippled.'

The essay explores Dr. Frankenstein's monster in relation to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow argues that there is a deliberate, methodical route individuals are motivated to travel in order to attain self-actualization, that is, the highest and most healthy state of being. In layman's terms, there are five hierarchically arranged levels in Maslow's theory, the levels must be realized in order, and once all are met, the subject achieves his/her highest potential:

Self-Actualization The individual possesses a feeling of self-fulfillment and the realizations of his/her highest potential

Self-Esteem Needs of self respect and respect from others, works to achieve success and recognition in work, and desires prestige from accomplishments

Love and Belonging Needs for giving and receiving of affection, companionship, satisfactory interpersonal relationships, and identification with a group

Safety and Security Needs for avoiding harm, maintaining comfort, order, structure, physical safety, freedom from fear, and protection

Physiological Needs Basic Needs including food, water, air, sleep, exercise, elimination, shelter, and sexual expression

Maslow also argues that the more one is self-actualized, the more (s)he manifests:

1. An accurate perception of reality
2. An acceptance of self, others, and nature
3. Spontaneity
4. Privacy with a tendency towards detachment
5. An appreciation for life, in an independent mode
6. Epiphanies (mystical, religious, or mission oriented)
7. A non-hostile sense of humor
8. Little racial, social, or religious prejudice
9. Creative, resourceful tendencies, and most important
10. Problem-centered rather than self centered motivation

When I first read the essay, I wondered how the student mentally then rhetorically bridged the link between the two disciplines and what behavioral traits Shelley's primary character exhibited to trigger such a creative response. Although I was familiar with this concept, I was by no means an expert and needed to learn more in order to appreciate the scope of this inventive approach. I therefore crossed the hall (and disciplines) and consulted with my colleague, Tamra Courey, Assistant Professor of Nursing. When she read the paper, she was equally enthused, the dialogue between us began, and we collaborated on several levels. In fact, from the onset, Tamra felt strongly that the student identified a connection between the fictional character and Maslow's well-known theory of human needs and she wanted to learn more about Frankenstein. Consider some key passages from the developmental English student essay:

"In Frankenstein, the monster created by Dr. Frankenstein begins at the lowest level: physiological. Throughout his life, the monster only strives to attain a higher level, primarily love, but he can never obtain this because he never really feels safe."

[Tamra] This passage reflects the monster's motivation to seek Maslow's higher levels in the hierarchy; it also identifies the struggles he faces.

“From the moment of his ‘birth’, the monster is abandoned and left to fend for himself. He obviously struggles at the beginning to satisfy his physiological need for food, water, and sleep. He has no one to teach him how to acquire these, but this need is so primitive that he does satisfy them. His actions reinforce the desire to satisfy the psychological need, which must be satisfied to survive.”

[*Tamra*] The basic human needs can only be fulfilled from assistance of other human beings; however, the monster manages to meet these needs alone; this demonstrates his quest for survival and self-actualization.

“At this point, he has satisfied his physiological need. He is unaware of any other forms of satisfaction, but he is aware that he is shunned by others and has no basis as to why. He survives in the woods, although very primitively, yet he desires more. He travels and finds a hut. When the monster enters the hut, the owner screams and runs out. The monster spends the night there enjoying the comforts. In the morning, he moves on and discovers a village, and as he enters one of the huts there, he again frightens the owners. The villagers attack him and run him out. He runs and hides in a hovel that is attached to another cottage. From his previous experiences, he fears entering the cottage. The lack of the safety need explains why he resides in the hovel and doesn’t attempt to enter the cabin.”

[*Tamra*] Based on the creature’s life circumstances, he is forced to stay at a lower level in the hierarchy; complete fulfillment of the safety and security needs would be a life long struggle.

“Upon observing a family, he sees safety and love, and now desires them. Through the monster’s observation of the family, he actually begins to feel the safety need. Even though he never joins them, he began to think of them as his own. He considers the hovel his home, and he also falls into a regular routine. So on some level, although minimal, he may have touched on the second level, but it is by no means ever attained.”

[*Tamra*] The student realizes that complete integration has not occurred.

“When Dr. Frankenstein ultimately dies and the monster enters the boat and gives his confession to the captain, there is reinforcement of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs in his words. He spent his entire life attempting to fulfill needs and desires and was never able to. Even after every failed attempt, he still tried. This is a sad and lonely way of life, and reinforces the need, and, most importantly the motivation to satisfy unsatisfied needs.”

Tamra and I agree that the student recognizes that the monster does not reach Maslow’s self-actualization level; however it is interesting to note that the monster’s behaviors reflect those of one who has attained self-actualization; he ultimately demonstrates autonomy, creativity, and most important, problem-centered rather than self-centered motivation; and, according to Tamra, such behaviors parallel a person with self-actualization.

Once we collaborated on these immediate points, the essay forced me to reevaluate my ‘traditional’ preface to teaching this novel, that is, my sharing biographical information on Mary Shelley as innovative author and ‘eclectic’ personality. In essence, it forced me to reconsider Mary Shelley within the Maslow framework:

Mary’s mother dies in childbirth and her father remarries a woman who is not fond of her; as a newborn, her physiological needs such as food, water, and shelter are most likely fulfilled; however a woman who does not have true affection towards Shelley, her stepmother, provides these basic needs. Consequently, Mary is lacking not only Maslow’s physiological needs but also higher level needs such as love and belonging in her most crucial formative years. She meets the already married Percy Bysshe Shelley at 15, becomes his lover, and ‘elopes;’ the fact that at age fifteen she chooses to leave home and ‘travel’ with Shelley supports her struggle with security, comfort, and structure at a very young age; however, Maslow’s safety and security needs that were previously lacking as a child may have been provided in this union between Shelley and Mary. Having her first illegitimate baby die when she is 18 is clearly traumatic, but giving birth

successfully at 19 (William) might have been positive; perhaps at one point, Mary actually achieves Maslow's higher levels of love and belonging needs. In fact, this may have been the very first time in her life she has moved beyond the lower level needs and feels true affection from another human being. Not only is Mary receiving affection from her husband, but she is also offering affection to her first-born son, William. And although realization of self-actualization, Maslow's highest hierarchal level, is a possibility at this point in Mary's life, attaining these higher levels is quickly shattered as she is faced with the loss of her half-sister, who commits suicide, the knowledge that Shelley's legal wife has also committed suicide, and the loss of yet another baby. In the midst of these deaths, however, Mary still manages to publish *Frankenstein*. Therefore, one might argue that she reaches Maslow's level of self-esteem while experiencing satisfaction for achieving success and recognition of her work. On the other hand, when she loses her beloved son William the next year, endures one more miscarriage, and loses her husband in a boating accident, at a mere 26 years old, she is perhaps robbed of ever successfully conquering the self-esteem level. It would seem that throughout Mary's life, although she transcends from one level of Maslow's hierarchy to another, she never truly satisfies every human need at each level. We can only speculate that self-actualization was unlikely as she remained in seclusion, in deep, dark despair, until her death, at 53.

In fact, once I looked at the author through the eyes of Maslow, I questioned how much of Mary, self-actualized or not, is manifested in her monster, her Victor, or even her Elizabeth, for that matter; these theories will be examined at another time, but this is another validation that the student's perception initiated pedagogical as well as contextual re-examination.

That said, it is not really the intent of this study to disseminate the student essay, to discuss at length the merits of the monster's self actualization, or lack thereof, or to assess the inherent biographical dysfunction that Mary Shelley may or may not have contributed to her novel; it merely recognizes and appreciates the potential for extraordinary alternative cross-disciplinary perspectives within our classroom and with our colleagues. Clearly inspired ideas and inventive thoughts are out there, just waiting to surface in a developmental essay, to be given, as Shakespeare would say, 'a local habitation and a name.' And after the ideas formulate and manifest themselves in the written word, there is dialogue—dialogue that an English professor can incorporate next semester, one that a Nursing professor can use in case exemplars—one that transcends self-imposed boundaries.

The purpose here then is first to celebrate the wisdom of one student who gives hope to those of us who stand before the class each day and utter 'Open your books! So, what do you think?' not always expecting anything extraordinary; then to celebrate that colleague who will collaborate on a moment's notice, offer insight into an otherwise foreign arena, and make it logical and relevant; and finally to celebrate the remarkable associative properties of two seemingly unrelated disciplines that can and do blend effectively; this is indeed the best of all academic worlds.