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The Misunderstood Monstrous: An Analysis of the Word “Monster” in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

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Abstract

Although Mary Shelley invented her chimerical creature in *Frankenstein* over 200 years ago, the Being still thrives within modern horror mythology. Recognizing that filmmakers, authors, and the characters within the original book itself often refer to Victor’s creation as a “monster”, this essay seeks to investigate how the application of this word impacts Shelley’s work. While the Being assumes many monstrous characteristics, from his abnormal body—built from a conglomeration of parts—to his murderous behavior, he often shows a softer side, driven by human desire. However, individuals with whom the Being interacts with repeatedly reduce him to the role of a “monster”, unable to see past his form. The societal expectation of this assumption presses upon the Being, driving him to fulfill the role that others handed him. The Being’s fate demonstrates the danger in assigning labels: beyond diminishing our understanding of others, societal mores often force individuals to reduce themselves.

The green, fumbling creature commonly mistaken as *Frankenstein* permeates modern horror. With movies, like *Frankenstein* (1931), songs, like the “Monster Mash,” and Halloween decorations all portraying this iconic character, individuals have designated the Being as a monster—one of the quintessential entities hiding in their closet. Yet, Mary Shelley’s original creature in *Frankenstein* (1818) complicates our understanding of this monstrosity. Upon initial inspection, the Being’s grotesque conglomeration of form and murderous tendencies fulfill our expectations of a monster. When the Being shares his narrative, however, he reveals a side of himself that savors nature and cares for companionship, two human characteristics. Despite this nuance, within modern media and the novel, people consistently reduce the Being to his deformity. Characters do not apply the same devaluation to Victor, whose actions parallel the Being in their heinousness. These unfair assessments highlight a cruel reality—individuals unfairly condemn the Being for his form, sentencing him before his trial begins.

Perceiving monsters as physical terrors, individuals characterize each monster as an abnormality. The Oxford English Dictionary highlights this tendency, simultaneously defining the word monster as “any imaginary creature that is large” and “a malformed animal or plant” and “a person of repulsively unnatural character” and “a marvel.” Tension, without a doubt, exists between these competing definitions. Yet, in their underlying meanings, these characterizations betray similarities, hinting how individuals perceive unnaturalness in these creatures. Indeed, monsters often confound traditional human perceptions of biology. According to Chris Baldick in his book, *In Frankenstein’s Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (2011), “it is an almost obligatory feature of the monsters in classical mythology that they should be composed of ill-assorted parts, sometimes combined from different creatures (centaurs, satyrs, the Minotaur, the Sphinx)...” This physical transgression of human-defined categorizations assigns an otherness to the monster, highlighting an uncertainty in the monstrous—about the monster’s purpose,

origin, and meaning. Baldick even argues that in Shakespeare, and other texts, humans described as monsters “break the natural bonds of obligation towards friends and especially towards blood-relations,” acting outside of concern for those close to them. In describing monsters as those who break societal standards, the monstrous becomes a creature not only “malformed” in appearance, but also in behavior.

The appearance of Victor’s creation adheres to the cliché of deformed monsters. Despite his intentions to craft the ideal form, Victor fashions the Being from a conglomeration of parts from unassociated bodies, animating a creature that unsettles:

“His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips.”

In his first interaction with his creation, Victor emphasizes the colors of the Being. Immediately, the Being’s “yellow” skin surrounds him with a sickly pallor. The “dun white sockets” and “straight black lips” parallel this discoloration, conjuring a nauseating image. Even where Victor succeeded in keeping the integrity of beautiful body parts—the “lustrous black” of the hair and “pearly whiteness” of the teeth—they serve to horrify: the intensity of each color acts in opposition to the other. These unnatural colors, and their unsettling combinations, craft a disfigured form that departs from human norm. The Being’s countenance often emphasizes this grotesque appearance. As he angrily talks to Victor throughout the novel, “his face was wrinkled into [horrible] contortions” and he “gnashed his teeth in the impotence of anger.” The “wrink[les]” mimic the stitches in the Being’s form. In “gnashing his teeth” and “contort[ing]” his face, the Being further distorts his form, highlighting his

chimerical nature. These unsettling facial expressions, along with the inhuman nature of his body, cause characters to define the Being as monstrous. Felix, Safie, and Agatha express “horror and consternation” upon discerning him. William labels the Being as an “ogre.” In moments of repulsion, these characters stereotype the Being as monstrous and soon reduce his character to his unnatural appearance.

The Being’s behavior often fulfills the monstrous standard. Throughout the novel, humans besiege the Being with countless epithets—“fiend”, “wretch”, “dæmon”, “murderer”—that assign a malignant quality to his character. The assumptions of these individuals manifest in the Being’s murderous behavior. Soon Victor grasps his dead wife: “The murderous mark of the fiend’s grasp was on her neck, and the breath had ceased to issue from her lips.” Just as with William and Henry, the Being leaves a “mark” on his latest victim. The description of these black imprints has an extremely visceral quality. In evoking the image of a hand of death, squeezing the life out of an individual, Victor emphasizes the agency of the Being. But beyond ascertaining that the Being executes these crimes, Victor argues that the Being indulges in them: “A grin was on the face of the monster; he seemed to jeer, as with his fiendish finger he pointed towards the corpse of my wife.” The positive connotation of the Being’s “grin” juxtaposes the morbidity of the “corpse,” creating a perverted scene of death. In “jeer[ing]” and pointing “his fiendish finger,” the Being almost provokes Victor, suggesting that he relishes his triumph. As he exults in his horrendous work, the Being assumes a sadistic quality. This merciless behavior makes the Being seem monstrous; he not only participates, but indulges, in his cruelty.

While the Being’s actions certainly horrify, his reaction to natural elements suggests his character cannot simply be flattened into a monstrous role. Throughout the novel, natural elements calm human distress. As Victor and Henry travel together, they revel in natural scenery:

"Even I, depressed in mind, and my spirits continually agitated by gloomy feelings, even I was pleased. I lay at the bottom of the boat, and, as I gazed on the cloudless blue sky, I seemed to drink in a tranquillity to which I had long been a stranger. And if these were my sensations, who can describe those of Henry? He felt as if he had been transported to Fairy-land, and enjoyed a happiness seldom tasted by man."

The sharp switch in Victor's emotions between "gloomy" and "pleased" reveals the transformative power of nature. The scene soon takes on a fantastical undertone, as the synesthetic line "drink in a tranquillity" and mention of the imaginary "Fairy-Land" portray a dreamlike reality. The natural beauty seems to almost trap Henry and Victor in a reverie. Furthermore, Victor defines Henry's experience as a "happiness seldom tasted by man," highlighting that this sensation is uncommon, yet desirable. After a cold, lonely night, the Being seems similarly moved: "Soon a gentle light stole over the heavens and gave me a sensation of pleasure. I started up, and beheld a radiant form rise from among the trees. I gazed with a kind of wonder." The Being's first description of nature parallels that of Victor's and Henry's. He characterizes the sunrise as "gentle," showing a calm disposition despite the turmoil of his night. Like Victor and Henry, he enters into a transformed state, undergoing the fantastical sense of "wonder" and "pleasure" characteristic of a reverie. The linking of these two scenes humanizes the Being, as he experiences a gentle appreciation of nature that seems innately opposite of monstrous.

Beyond his experience with complex human emotion, the Being's eagerness for the human bond of friendship further undermines his monstrous title. Throughout *Frankenstein*,

nearly all humans desire friendship. In his second letter to his sister, Walton expresses this longing: "I have no friend, Margaret: when I am glowing with the enthusiasm of success, there will be none to participate my joy; if I am assailed by disappointment, no one will endeavour to sustain me in dejection...I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me; whose eyes would reply to mine." Mere reciprocity does not define the friendship that Walton seeks. Rather, in wanting an individual that will "participate [his] joy" and

"sympathize," Walton reveals that he yearns for a man who will commiserate with him in his passions. He wishes for a person who will "sustain [him] in dejection," suggesting he also views friendship as a supportive structure. These characterizations craft an ideal friendship derived from mutual affection and support. The Being fulfills these roles for the unknowing de Lacey family: "The gentle manners and beauty of the cottagers greatly endeared them to

me; when they were unhappy, I felt depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathized in their joys." The Being "sympathized" with the family, showing a companionship similar to Walton's desired friend. In fact, the Being seems to feel the cottagers' emotions more vividly; his description of himself as "depressed" has a stronger magnitude than the villagers' "unhapp[iness]." The Being also fulfills the role of support. When he witnesses Felix struggle to provide wood for the family, he produces the resource from the nearby forest. In becoming a friend for the unknowing de Laceys, the Being upholds human bonds, rather than breaking them down, as the monstrous trope suggests he should. The Being, therefore,

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assumes a decidedly un-monstrous role in his early interactions with other individuals.

Despite the multi-dimensional nature of the Being's character, individuals repeatedly reduce him to a monstrous role. Even though the de Lacey's describe him as a "good spirit" as he anonymously aids the family, the Being does not truly engage in the friendship that Walton describes. When Safie, Agatha, and Felix see him, they reject him:

"Who can describe their horror and consternation on beholding me? Agatha fainted; and Safie, unable to attend to her friend, rushed out of the cottage. Felix darted forward, and with supernatural force tore me from his father, to whose knees I clung: in a transport of fury, he dashed me to the ground, and struck me violently with a stick. I could have torn him limb from limb, as the lion rends the antelope. But my heart sunk within me as with bitter sickness, and I refrained."

In Latin, the word *felix* translates to "fortunate," setting the reader up to believe that the family may accept the Being. Yet, in a subversion of this expectation, Felix's reaction creates a cruel rejection against the Being. The phrase "transport of fury" suggests that the Being's sudden appearance has agitated Felix so much that he is out of his mind. Felix's violent behavior is even described as "supernatural," which highlights the unnatural, inhumane nature of his actions. Although the Being is supposedly "unnatural" himself, his reaction juxtaposes Felix's brutal deeds. The Being equates himself with the predatory "lion" and Felix with the preyed "antelope," but does not fulfill this expected role. This contrast enhances the cruelty of the Being's circumstance. Even though the monster in this scene is not the Being, others still treat him as such.

Victor doubles the Being, illuminating the cause of the Being's unfair treatment. While the Being's early actions certainly paint him as a caring creature, one may point to his murderous behavior, unwilling to remove his monstrous title. Yet, Victor parallels the Being in "monstrous" behavior, often

expressing distaste for his creation: "My abhorrence of this fiend cannot be conceived. When I thought of him, I gnashed my teeth, my eyes became inflamed, and I ardently wished to extinguish that life which I had so thoughtlessly bestowed." Just as with the Being, the anger within Victor manifests first in his countenance. In "gnash[ing his] teeth," Victor directly parallels the Being in monstrous expression. This link extends into his vengeful behavior: just as the Being wishes to smother the lives of those around Victor, Victor wishes to "extinguish" the Being's life. Victor even acts on these murderous desires, destroying the Being's one hope at companionship. Despite these fiendish inclinations, outsiders construct Victor as an admirable individual. Indeed, Walton establishes high regard for Victor: "...his manners are so conciliating and gentle... I begin to love him as a brother; and his constant and deep grief fills me with sympathy and compassion. He must have been a noble creature in his better days, being even now in wreck so attractive and amiable." Walton describes Victor with a range of positive attributes, calling him "conciliating," "gentle," and "noble," and, despite having known Victor for only a short period, even expresses a brotherly love for him. This positive characterization follows Victor throughout the novel. Characters consistently express concern and love for Victor, regardless of his often-unreliable behavior. Even after Walton has heard Victor's full tale, he defends Victor's behavior and admonishes the Being. Why? Consider the two attributes Walton assigns Victor: "attractive and amiable." Both Victor, in his kindness towards his family and Henry, and the Being, in kindness towards the de Lacey's, certainly exhibit "amiable" qualities. However, the Being lacks Victor's "attractive" physiognomy. This diversion reveals an unsettling reality: individuals within the novel simply assume that the so-called "monstrosity" in the Being's form applies to his character, reducing him to this role.

Her treatment doubling the Being's, Justine serves as a reference point for why the assumptions about the Being should

be seen as cruel. After falsely pleading guilty, Justine explains her interrogation: “Ever since I was condemned, my confessor has besieged me; he threatened and menaced, until I almost began to think that I was the monster that he said I was...” Justine begins her reflection with the word “condemned” and immediately follows it with “confessor,” mirroring the backward order of her trial—the crowd decides her fate before she tells her story. Her name, in its allusion to justice, emphasizes this injustice that she experiences. Furthermore, the actions of the priest in obtaining a delayed confession are anything but holy; he “besieged,” “threatened,” and “menaced” Justine. These paradoxical actions create an unsettling image for the reader. If someone as pious as a confessor can draw dangerous assumptions, what does that suggest for the rest of humanity? Indeed, the accusations have a strange effect on Justine, causing her to even call herself a “monster.” In using this harsh term to describe herself, Justine highlights how much the allegations of others can impress upon the mind. Elizabeth and Victor’s reaction to Justine’s trial highlights that individuals should sympathize with her case. Elizabeth reflects on Justine’s death to Victor: “...men appear to me as monsters thirsting for each other’s blood... Every body believed that poor girl to be guilty...” In her description of Justine as “poor,” Elizabeth shows her distress at Justine’s case. She describes those who assume Justine’s guilt as “monsters,” transferring the monstrosity that individuals perceive within Justine to the individuals themselves. Throughout the novel, “monster” refers to the Being almost exclusively. These two passages, the only exceptions to this standard, suggest the hypocrisy in referring to the Being as a “monster.” Like Justine, before he commits any sort of monstrous crime, others assign him guilt. Yet, as Elizabeth’s suggestion hints, the true so-called “monstrous” individuals are those with societal expectations.

The societal mores lurking behind the word “monster” press upon the Being’s psyche. In his reflections, the Being often refers to himself as a monster:

“And what was I? Of my creation and creator, I was absolutely ignorant; but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was, besides, endowed with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man... When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?”

The Being, in describing himself as “deformed” and “loathsome” exhibits the same distaste for his form that other individuals do. The Being inverts the traditional question of “what am I” into the question of “what was I,” revealing his need for a more primal categorical answer to his existence. Having read several classic novels, like *Paradise Lost*, the Being quickly finds that he does not fulfill any traditional human category: not that of Adam, for his creator scorns him; not that of a wealthy man, for he has no money or property; not that of a companion, for he has no friends. Knowing only these limited human roles, the Being categorizes himself as an abnormality—a “monster.” This knowledge that the Being gains leads him only to self-hatred. The more the Being discovers, the more he loathes himself: “Increase of knowledge only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast I was.” Yet, the “knowledge” that the Being gains stems from human thought, and therefore is innately biased against a so-called inhuman creature. Despite this, the standards that the Being comes to learn torment him, leaving him with a sense of self that others’ opinions taint. The word “monster,” therefore, does not only reveal outside individuals’ reduction of the Being, but also his reduction of himself. As these outside standards suffocate the Being, he enters into a self-fulfilling prophecy: he becomes what others, and he himself, believe him to be.

The societal expectations that the other characters place upon the Being manifest in modern portrayals of *Frankenstein*, highlighting our own reduction of the Being’s character. In 1931, Universal Pictures released *Frankenstein*, a film retelling the mythology of the Being’s creation. While the movie shares

a title with Mary Shelley's novel, the film does not mimic all the same critical elements she uses to create horror. Firstly, consider how the two works portray the Being's creation. Within the novel, Victor carefully hides the process behind how he reanimated life. His reluctance to explain adds to the horrific nature of the novel; the imagination of the reader drifts far beyond the limitations of science, wondering what abhorrent measures must have silenced Victor. The film departs from this nuance. Henry Frankenstein does not create the Being alone but rather presents to an audience of his professor, his fiancé, and friend. By portraying this scientific process in a public way, the film loses the mystery that is so vital to the horror of the original *Frankenstein*. However, while the film forgoes the horror of hiding how Victor creates the Being, it embraces the deformed nature of his chimerical form. Stitches are visible on the creature's body and his head takes on the same odd square shape now iconic in Halloween decorations. These two decisions—one diverging from and one honoring the horror of the novel—reveal that producers were willing to sacrifice certain critical characteristics of Shelley's text to craft a film that they believed would serve to terrify. Similarly, other interpretations, like *The Original Monster Mash*, whose lighthearted cover is adorned by a green, square-headed creature, select specific elements of Shelley's narrative to follow. It is not the Being's intelligence, wonder at nature, or desire to have a companion that survives these retellings. Rather, in each new story, the Being appears disfigured. In choosing to include this horrific element of Shelley's story over others, these creatives select what they found to be truly unsettling about her narrative—the unnatural nature of this chimerical creature. Societal focus on this abnormality suggests that, like the characters within the novel, we have reduced the Being to less than a sum of his parts, labeling a physiognomy that frightens us with the word “monster.”

The mythology of the creature within *Frankenstein* has certainly expanded far beyond Mary Shelley's original

narrative. Yet across modern portrayals, the Being retains the same deformed appearance that Shelley first details in her novel. In choosing to focus on this flattened version of the Being, we reduce the novel *Frankenstein* itself, creating a mythology that, rather than exploring the subtlety of character and responsibility, highlights how boldly we assign the label “monster”—condemning anything we view as *unnatural* or *other* before we even begin to seek their story.

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