Frankenstein: Human v.s. Monster

There is sometimes a fine line between what a person might consider "human" or "not human." Humanity is a fragile concept because people often link it with normalcy. Anything that appears abnormal or unexplained maybe be deemed inhuman, or even monstrous. The difference between what is "human" and what is "not human" or "monstrous," however, is no hard fact, and often it depends on the perspective of the person in question.

With this in mind, what might Victor Frankenstein of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* have to say about humanity? In contrast, how would his own creature, the monster himself, respond to such a question?

A popular phrase that often tends to apply to real life situations is "Like father, like son." Although the monster of *Frankenstein* may not be of his father's own flesh and blood, Victor uses his very hands to create him and forges an unbreakable bond between them, whether he realizes it or not at the time. From the monster's first moment, their lives become linked together and remain so until their last moments, even in their furious hatred for one another. They both think the other one inhuman or monstrous in some way, but even the two of them fail to see their similarities. Through the parallels in Victor's and the creature's lives, from their desires and dreams to their family experience and relationship to one another, we can determine who is more human, and if there is a true monster in their relationship.

Victor has a fairly easy life growing up, although that life is not without tragedy, for his mother dies while he is still only seventeen. Yet, he never lacks in quality of life, nor does he know a childhood without the love and support of a family. He tells of his childhood on his deathbed upon arctic explorer Robert Walton's ship and speaks fondly of his family: "No creature could have more tender parents than mine" (Shelley 19). As he describes his beloved cousin Elizabeth,

his best friend Henry Clerval, and his compassionate mother and father, he seems to look back on his youth as the happiest time of his life. It is possible that Victor even takes some of his great fortune as a child for granted and never truly takes the time to appreciate it, as shown by his almost frantic desperate to create new life, to the extent that he ignores the letters from his family for months while buried in his work. His ambition and desire for greatness are ultimately what lead to the horror that follows (Van Oort 136).

He boasts, "I was surprised that among so many men of genius, who had directed their inquiries towards the same science, that I alone should be reserved to discover so astonishing a secret" (Shelley 31-32). In this moment, there seems to be an implication that Victor feels that he has surpassed humanity, as only God himself is known to create life. All at once, this grand power is within his hands, and he cannot resist following through and bringing life to the creature he would later come to loathe.

His immediate fear and hatred of his creature is ultimately what seals his fate. When he first sees the monster, he recoils in horror at the sight:

> 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 luxuries 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 shriveled complexion, and straight black lips (Shelley 35).

The monster's appearance is so hideous that Victor cannot stand it, and he flees and abandons the monster to fend for himself against the pain and suffering that the world has to offer.

Perhaps the most significant difference between Victor and the monster is that the latter is never graced with a family's care. After Victor abandons him, he is forced to learn to survive on his own. To add to the monster's fear and confusion, every human being he encounters either runs or attempts to beat him down in terror of his abnormal appearance. Alone and afraid after getting chased out of a village, he arrives in a new town where he discovers the De Lacey family. From them he learns the beauty of compassion and language while living secretly in their shed. It is after the family's horrific discovery of his existence that he realizes his creator must have cursed him, and that no human with two normal eyes would ever show him kindness or sympathy. After all, why should they? Why would anyone think to show a monster any kindness?

The monster's strongest desire is for love and companionship, which eventually leads him to demand that Victor create a partner for him. Victor first agrees to do this, on the condition that the monster leave and never return. Although Victor trusts the monster's word, he wonders whether or not the female monster he creates will agree to the same terms. He begins to fear that by creating another monster, he will subject the world to an entire race of monsters, who may pose a danger to humanity. Coming to this conclusion, Victor destroys his new creature before finishing it. The monster, filled with anger and rage that Victor would deny him his happiness, makes the decision to destroy Victor's life by taking away everything he holds dear. This is significant because of the wonderful existence Victor leads before he brings life to the monster, and the resentment the monster feels toward him for having everything while he has nothing. First, he murders Victor's little brother William in anger and frames his servant Justine, sentencing her to death as well. However, although his first killing takes place in the spur of the moment, he later cruelly takes the lives of Victor's best friend and his wife after Victor ruins his chances of happiness.

Whether he truly feels any kind of remorse for these actions is unclear until the end of the novel, but one thing is certain from the beginning; at the very least, he believes his violence is justified in the name of all he has suffered as a result of humanity and his creator. This brings to light an important similarity between the creature and Victor—they both believe themselves to be victims (Van Oort 135-136).

The monster has enough experience and intelligence to understand the difference between right and wrong, as shown by his awareness of his misdeeds when he confronts Victor for the first time. Yet, he has been so tormented that he is willing to take as many lives as he must in order to assure that Victor grants him his happiness. While it is conceivable that a person who has never been shown any love might turn to inflicting pain on others, the monster is fully aware of his own state of mind and makes the conscious choice to use it as an excuse to gain Victor's sympathy and cooperation. When the monster finally confronts Victor after the deaths of William and Justine, he says, "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous." (Shelley 68). He shows no regret, only claiming, "I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed," and placing the blame for his vile behavior entirely on Victor (Shelley 68). He insists that Victor cast him aside into Hell as if he were Satan, and that it is only because of his circumstances that he performed such despicable deeds.

Likewise, Victor seems to have little interest in taking responsibility for his actions and blames the creature entirely for his troubles (Van Oort 135-136). Even in his moments where he expresses guilt and remorse for his actions, he refuses to acknowledge them outwardly and continuously denies his fault (Van Oort 135-136). After the deaths of his younger brother and his servant, the creature finally approaches Victor, who greets him with scorn and hate, calling him,

"Devil," and "Abhorred monster" (Shelley 67). While these terms may be fitting for the murderer of a child and indirectly so of a young woman, Victor's true reasoning for treating the creature with such disdain is his need to distance himself so that he can ease his own guilt. While relaying his story to Walton, Victor does seem to show some regret for his ambition, and even expresses that he cannot ask Walton to follow through with his desire for revenge: "I dare not ask you to do what I think right, for I may still be misled by passion" (Shelley 157). In this moment, Victor admits there is a possibility that he may not be right in his actions. Yet, through telling his story to set this example, his pride never slips (Van Oort 142-143). He carries the secret of his scientific discovery to the grave, believing that by doing so he is protecting humanity. He shows a desire to, not only be pitied, but to be held in some high regard, which demonstrates a certain over-abundance of self-importance until the bitter end (Van Oort 143).

After Victor's death, however, the monster does voice some regret for what he has done. He claims more than once in his monologue in the end of the story that his pain far exceeds Victor's, which may in part relate to him knowing and living with the understanding that he is a monster (Brooks 384). However, he also notes that his own pain over his murders was greater and that Victor suffered "not the ten-thousandth portion of the anguish that was mine during the lingering detail of its execution" (Shelley 158). He laments to Walton all that he has done wrong and all that Victor inflicted upon him, and confesses to his own self-hatred. Walton calls him out, naming him "hypocritical," for regretting his actions after intentionally going through with them while knowing the consequences (Van Oort 144, Shelley 159). The monster then explains himself, admitting the depth of his sadness and even tells him that, ultimately, revenge was not enough. "For whilst I destroyed his hopes, I did not satisfy my own desires. They were for ever ardent and craving; I still desired love and fellowship, and I was still spurned" (Shelley 160). This scene

shows his humanity and reminds readers of the kind and gentle nature he had before his disillusionment.

Some people may be inclined to grant both Victor and the creature the title of "monster" after considering the horrible crimes they have committed. However, one might argue that both of their actions are, in fact, very human. It is not uncommon for human beings to attempt to lift the blame off themselves if they feel they have done wrong, because it eases their pain. The war between Victor and the monster is quite like a war between countries; both sides always believe they are justified. Is there always a correct answer? Perhaps, but human beings do not always have the capacity to find it. Humans will often perform horrific acts for their own gain or success, but that does not necessarily equate to a lower level of humanity. It all depends on the perspective of the person speaking.

It is important to note that the creature, unlike Victor, is never given a name (Van Oort 124). Throughout the novel, readers know him only as "Monster" or whatever vile word Victor chooses to bestow upon him at the time. Whether Mary Shelley originally intended it, the monster's lack of a true name dehumanizes him and makes it more difficult to readers to create a connection with him.

Some might also consider the monster less human because of his appearance. However, the important point to note about *Frankenstein* is that readers never truly see the creature, and his hideousness is left partially to the imagination of the reader. People living outside of the world of the novel get to know the monster through his character and, most importantly, his language. The monster knows well that any human being who sees his hideous form will treat him with disdain, but he is also quite aware of the power of language on his side (Brooks 370-371). He makes reference to this during his first encounter with Victor; when Victor snaps at the monster to

"begone," he simply reaches out to cover his creator's eyes so he will not have to see him (Shelley 69 and Brooks 370). Being quite articulate, the creature elicits sympathy from the reader and other characters with his story of woe (Brooks 371). He uses his education and ability to speak fluently to his advantage in the De Lacey family's cottage while making an attempt to connect with the eldest member of the family, a blind old man (Brooks 371). Due to his inability to see the monster, he takes some pity on him and may have agreed to help, if not for the rest of the family's return forcing him to flee. Despite his hideousness, even Victor and Walton almost show some sadness for the monster as he tells them of his suffering (Brooks 371-372).

Although also blessed with the advantage of a human appearance, Victor is quite similar to the monster in that he has strong powers of speech. He uses his words to gain sympathy just as the monster does, especially as he tells his tragic story to Walton (Van Oort 141). However, it is reasonable that Victor himself is dehumanized in some aspects throughout the story, although this is a more gradual process for him than it is for the monster. The first time the novel shows this is during the time Victor spends working on the structure of his monster. By retreating into his own mind and studies and cutting off his family and the outside world, he makes himself appear less human to society. However, his downward spiral does not truly begin until the murder of his younger brother, which subsequently causes the execution of his servant. It is the monster's anger and despair that cause the string of murders, but the killings become more orchestrated and malicious after Victor destroys his second creation. By willfully denying his monster the companionship he desires, Victor sparks an evil intent in him. As consequence, the monster decides to destroy Victor's connection to everyone he loves so that he will suffer the same fate—to exist in a cold, lonely world of isolation. Unable to cope with his losses and clearly unable to move forward and start anew with the monster at his back, the tragic figure's attachment to

humanity is severed. He spends the rest of his days on the move, futilely chasing the monster in order to put an end to the life he created. Only hatred and vengeance toward the monster guide him forward until his eventual death aboard Walton's ship.

Yet, it would seem too simplistic to categorize Victor or his creature as inhuman or monstrous because of appearance or misdeed. The monster only desires the same things that any human hopes for in life (Van Oort 134). There is a distinction between what is human and what is ethical; human beings are predisposed to making mistakes, and often committing horrible acts in the name of their desires. It is through the creature's longing for companionship and his feelings of rage and betrayal toward Victor that make him human, just as it is through Victor's love for his family and hatred of the creature that make him human. Astoundingly, both Victor and the monster are more alike than either of them realize, and although the monster starts as little more than a science experiment, he eventually becomes every bit as human as Victor. Neither of them are truly monsters, but instead both victims of their own human flaws, caught in a cycle of hatred until their last breaths.

Works Cited

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