

# Frankenstein's Monster: Humanity Unbound and Alive

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## ABSTRACT:

*Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: or Modern Prometheus has always been the focal point in dealing with the shifting paradigms of humanity and monstrosity. The point at issue is - Is the 'creature' really a monster or is he essentially human? It is notable that throughout the novel the creature has been degraded by other people, mostly by his own creator Victor Frankenstein, as something which can never be a part of humanity. This sense of alienation has caused the monster to commit inhuman murders and, also, it has created, within him, an urge to sacrifice his own life after his so-called revenge or the death of his creator. The creature's rejection of his own life can be seen as a failure of the society to accept anything as 'human' which is different. At the same time, Steve Niles in his 'Frankenstein Alive, Alive'(2018) has attempted to continue the story which Mary Shelley left open-ended. In his attempt, the primary focus is on the creature's acceptance of the value of his life and, eventually, his humanity.*

*This paper would attempt to analyze the role of the society to victimize the creature as a monster based on the tone of 'ugliness' and the gradual understanding of the monster of his own growing humanity through inner conflicts and self-scrutinizing.*

Mary Shelley gave her mad scientist the ultimate power to create life. And Victor Frankenstein wasted no time in creating the iconic monster figure, his ultimate experiment:

"I began the creation of a human being."(53)

'*Frankenstein: or Modern Prometheus*' is a novel that aimed to answer questions that were confusing to the contemporary readers of Mary Shelley. Mary Shelley herself was confused in some situations. Throughout the novel, she left no loose ends. But the ending of the novel represents something other than a symmetrically woven plot. We will discuss the topic later as it is the central point of the paper.

*Frankenstein* was published in 1818 and brought with it a thick smog of ideas telling the society to confront the unthinkable. Knowledge is power-it can be a godly bliss or a hellish curse. The story of the novel hangs between two spheres as there is no pure positivity and negativity in the novel. 'Frankenstein' is fuelled by the sense of alienation. From the beginning, the readers find that 'knowledge' is the poisonous wine for both Victor Frankenstein and his creation. We can say that they are the two sides of the same coin. They cannot live without each other, yet they have to live without each other.

In 1831, in her introduction to the novel, Mary explained that her intention was to, "Speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror." *Frankenstein* as a gothic novel plays with the concepts of fear, taboo, and doom. Dr. Frankenstein violated the law of nature by experimenting with death and life. Not only did he play with the power of the Omnipotent, but also created a creature with superhuman abilities. The atmosphere was full of thunder and storms which led to the tragic tone of the novel. But, Mary Shelley was a romantic like her husband, and we find the instances throughout the novel. The descriptions of Mother Nature at her fullest beauty give the novel a romantic flavor. We can argue that the novel is a hybrid of the concept of gothic and romanticism. A part of the novel is surrounded by human emotions and compassion which are the essence of romanticism. The themes of humanity and alienation are blended together to impregnate the story with a mythical context of the modern period. The monster itself is a product of romanticism as it represents social rejection and taboo.

Now, when we have discussed romanticism and its connectivity with the novel and the presentation of humanity, we will come to the center point of the paper: Is the creature a monster or a human? To understand this we have to analyze the utter loneliness of the monster as well as his attempts to socialize himself. Victor Frankenstein created his monster out of death and nothingness:

"It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet."(57)

The mad scientist said that he would create a human being. But at the same time, he was saying that he had used a 'lifeless thing'. So, he used a 'thing' to create a human life. He was himself alienating his creation. His 'human being' is distinctly inhuman for him. The term 'being'

has been used by Victor and it is an 'abstract' term. But it is not human in any way possible. From every description given by Victor it is clear that the monster is an object:

"...by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open, it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs."(57)

The word 'it' has been used by Victor and 'it' possesses yellow dull eyes. The image creates an eerie feeling among the readers. The movements of the creature were not lifelike, they were mechanized to some extent. We don't feel that it is a natural life. The readers, along with Victor, memorize the monster as an object:

"How can I describe my emotions at the catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavored to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great god! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same color as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips."(57)

It can be sensed that before giving the creature life, the lifeless body was acceptable to Victor. It was 'dead', so it was okay. But when it gained life the same 'body' became the point of hatred and disgust for him. He became sick seeing his monstrous creation:

"The different accidents of life are not as changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this, I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, unable to compose my mind to sleep. At length lassitude succeeded to the tumult I had before endured; and I threw myself on the bed in my clothes, endeavouring to seek a few moments of forgetfulness."(57)

So, to Victor, his creature is a failure. He attempted to create a human being. But, what he

created was a 'miserable wretch'. And Mary Shelley, from the beginning of the novel, tried to show her readers, or rather, misled her readers that the creature was 'non-human'. But the whole concept has a double meaning. Through Victor, Mary was creating an 'inhuman' image for the creature, only to destroy it and restore the humanity in the monster.

At first, the consciousness of the monster was like a blank slate-'tabula rasa'. He didn't know about his own identity. After he fled from the house of Victor Frankenstein, his experience started. He found the laws of nature intriguing and refreshing. Now, at this point, we start to see the contrast between the earlier portrayal and the current portrayal of the monster. Now, he is not evil to us anymore. So, it is a continuous process of realization. Gradually the inner layers are getting revealed. The monster was deeply moved by the natural scenes he was experiencing for the first time:

"How miraculous did this appear!the huts, the neater cottages, and stately houses engaged my admiration by turns."(106)

The mood of the monster was gay and joyous like a little child. But he was aware that the people were behaving awkwardly seeing him. They were afraid. But he didn't know why. Like Victor, the people were seeing him as a monster only. They were, totally, neglecting his 'little and developing humanity'. But, it was not the fault of the creature, but the fault was in the part of Victor Frankenstein and the other people.

At first, the monster was not aware of the situation. But his encounter with the 'cottagers' gradually opened his eyes. He was different from the rest of humanity. It awoke within him the questions about self-identity:

"My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was destination?"(128)

Frankenstein's monster was himself, questioning his humanity. We understand that he is as human as the rest of humanity. Now, the only way to prove his humanity to the 'cottagers' or to other people, for the monster, was to learn the mode of communication. Throughout history, mankind has developed the processes of communication to express themselves more clearly. Through his experiences with the cottagers, the monster had found out that only by learning how to communicate he could express his emotions and intentions to the cottagers:

"...for I easily perceived that, although I eagerly longed to discover myself to

the cottagers, I ought not to make the attempt until I had first become master of their language; which knowledge might enable me to make them overlook the deformity of my figure.”(113)

Education or knowledge can be a way of making the monster more humanized. Maureen McLane, in her essay '*Literate Species: Populations, "Humanities", and Frankenstein*' (*English Literary History*, Vol. 63, p. 959-988)), explores the dimensions:

“Shelley’s corporeally indeterminate but decidedly literate monster asks us to consider whether literature- taken in all its bearings- was or is indeed a useful ‘line of demarcation between’ human and animal. The fate of the monster suggests that proficiency in ‘the art of language’, as he calls it, may not ensure one’s position as a member of the ‘human kingdom’. Shelley shows us how a literary education...presupposes not merely an educable subject but a human being.”

So, the monster’s failure at showing, to the cottagers, his humanity is directly related to the issue. Though Shelley was trying to express that the knowledge and language could connect the monster with the rest of humanity, she also showed that the monster was unable to cross the boundary line between monstrosity and humanity. It was not the fault of the monster, but the prejudice of humanity itself.

To the monster, the concept of family and love was being cleared up gradually. He longed for kindness and love of the cottagers. Though he was in hiding, still he became a part of the lives of his fellow beings in the cottage, of their sadness and happiness:

“I had been accustomed during the night, to steal a part of their store for my own consumption; but when I found that in doing this I inflicted pain on the cottagers, I abstained, and satisfied myself with berries, nuts, and roots, which I gathered from a neighbouring wood.”(111)

This ‘humanity’ of the monster was attacked by the cottagers when Felix used the stick to beat him mercilessly. The creature’s hopes were shattered. Not only the cottagers but also his creator had rejected his humanity. The monster’s rage and anger were not the outburst of his devilish nature. He had murdered William, Henry, and Elizabeth. Those murders were a crime indeed. But they, necessarily, did not condemn him as an ‘evil being’. Revenge and crime is a

part of the human psyche. The monster took revenge on his creator for his miserable condition. He was also aware of the fact that he was committing crimes, yet he continued to torment Victor Frankenstein (because of his emotional outburst). But in the midst of this, we also see the act of kindness done by the monster:

“I was scarcely hid, when a young girl came running towards the spot where I was concealed, laughing, as if she ran from some one in sport. She continued her course along the precipitous sides of the river, when suddenly her foot slipped, and she fell into the rapid stream. I rush from my hiding-place; and, with extreme labour from the force of the current, saved her, and dragged her to shore.”(140)

The creature was being rejected by ‘the humanity’ continuously. Yet, he was being more human only to be attacked again:

“On seeing me, he darted towards me, and tearing the girl from my arms, hastened towards the deeper parts of the wood. I followed speedily, I hardly knew why; but when the man saw me draw near, he aimed a gun, which he carried, at my body, and fired.”(141)

And yet again the monster’s humanity faced the hateful rejection of mankind. All the crimes the monster had committed can be seen as his crusade against his creator or so-called mankind. But that doesn’t make him less human. We can say that the monster fought back. And he was aware of the consequences. With the death of Victor Frankenstein, he aimed to erase his hateful existence. The monster knew that with the death of his creator the vicious circle was nearly complete. He only needed to die to make the circle whole:

“I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames.”(223)

According to Chris Baldick, the creature “has no mechanical characteristics, and is fully a human creature;..not as a machine, a robot, a helot, or any other labour saving convenience, but as the Adam of a new race which will love and venerate its creator.” The monster was not inherently evil. His evil deeds were born out of misery and despair. He was human, fully capable of emotional interaction. With the death of Victor, the monster chose self-annihilation. But, was

it the end?

There are several digressions about what happened after the original story. The novel by Mary Shelley is open-ended and has led to many parallel alternate storylines. One of the most notable among them is '*Frankenstein Alive, Alive*' by Steve Niles and Bernie Wrightson. It is a graphic novel published in 2018. But why is it important and from what perspective? There are many critical theories and essays regarding the ending of the novel. This graphic novel can play a crucial role, among them, because it has a direct connection with the ending of the original story. It starts with the monster being a part of a circus where he had learned to accept the harsh truth that he was a monster:

“I am never what they expect...So I have also learned it is always best to give them what they expect.”(9)

The story revolves around the monster's inability to die and his inner turmoil as he was being haunted by his creator's ghost who was continually reminding him of his crimes and wretchedness:

“Frankenstein! You've come back from Hell to devil me in my final hour!”(13)

It is not actually Victor Frankenstein's ghost, but the monster's own consciousness that was tormenting him and telling him to repent for his murderous acts by self-sacrifice:

“But I did not let the specter alter my course. Death, or any semblance of it, was my destiny.”(14)

Being unable to die after attempting several times, the monster became doomed to walk on the surface of the earth with all his guilt. But we can easily understand that this sense of guilt was the example of his 'humanity'. He continually struggled because of it. It is the moral battle between him and his past crimes which makes him more human. When the monster came into contact with Dr. Simon Ingles, his first thought was that he had found a person who could overlook his deformity and look into his inner humanity. But he was shocked when he found out about Dr. Ingles' terrifying experiment to create a life by sacrificing a just born child. He was pulled towards a vicious struggle of emotions. He became more concerned about his humanity:

“I thought of the volumes I read, so many tales of human torment and death, but also of selflessness and bravery. Was this riot in my mind a reflection of the monster I was, or of the human I was becoming? And that thought terrified me

more than any other...was I becoming one of them and less the monster Victor had made?"(50)

His humanity prevailed against the continuous onslaught of the society who condemned him as the monster. And it was that humanity which had led the monster to rescue the pregnant lady from Dr. Ingles' prison. And when the baby was born, his viewpoint had totally changed:

"I had for so long been surrounded by death and now, in the swirl of a winter storm, held life in my hands."(64)

The monster became aware of his existence for the first time. And this awareness ultimately led to his desire to live. We can see this as the triumph of his humanity. The meaning of humanity is to understand and sustain life. With this understanding, the monster not only had preserved his humanity but also achieved a higher position than the rest of humanity:

"But even if not a man, I am still alive...and any creature of this world, whether born by science or sorcery, deserves to live."(67)

Why was the monster rejected by humanity? The reason is simple because he was ugly. But the term 'ugly' is not as simple as it seems. Denise Gigante, in her *'Facing the Ugly: The Case of "Frankenstein"'* (*English Literary History, Vol. 67, p. 565-587*), writes, "In fact, in Frankenstein, the term 'ugly' emerges at the precise point when the speaking subject is about to be consumed by such incoherence." She roots out the cause of the monster's monstrosity when she says, "Thus while it is couched in admittedly boyish terms, William Frankenstein's fatal encounter with the Creature- "monster! Ugly wretch! You wish to eat me, and tear me to pieces" (F, 169) -contains a fundamental insight into the nature of ugliness itself: the ugly is that which threatens to consume and disorder the subject." So, all the people including Victor feared the monster because he was different. He was tall, he was strong and he was ugly. To Victor and to other people he was just a plague ready to destroy the natural flow of life. It was not necessary for them to see past the monster's outer appearance. The monster tried, again and again, to prove that he had all the good qualities of mankind to get their approval. He begged. But the only thing he was able to get was the feeling of otherness. When the monster murdered Victor's family, Victor condemned him as evil. But in reality, the monster's thirst for revenge is also a part of human nature. But his murderous intentions were the by-products of his failure to acquire love. The monster knew that love was the source of all happiness. That is why he



asked Victor to create a female monster for him as he knew only another creature like him might accept him:

“My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor; and my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal. I shall feel the affections of a sensitive being, and become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which I am now excluded.” (147)

Jeanne M. Britton, in her essay ‘*Novelistic Sympathy in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*’ (*Studies in Romanticism, Vol. 48, No. 1, p. 3-22*), has summarized that the monster only wanted a sympathetic companionship, but he was unable to find it and it can be seen as the outcome of the failure of social sympathy.

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