

Rescuing from Misinterpretation: Reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* Again

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ABSTRACT

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is one of the most famous works of the age. It is one of those works whose character has been placed in the English dictionaries to denote the qualities that are associated with the character. In the course of time, *Frankenstein* has come to denote sinister, monstrous and something that has been created by man for self-destruction. However, when one reads the novel, one realises that the story was strictly interpreted in accordance with the beliefs prevalent at the time. When one reads *Frankenstein* closely, one discovers that the monstrosity thrust upon *Frankenstein* is intended to save humanity. *Frankenstein* is not born a monster; instead, he becomes one because of the mistreatment he suffers. This paper is an attempt to interpret the novel on the basis of the text only.

Interpreting literature has been a debatable issue for a long time. People have been interpreting literature from different points of view throughout history. In the beginning, for instance, the focus was more on the poet's personality, background, marital status, and personal life. However, things changed drastically once New Criticism found a place among academics and critics. Now the focus shifted from the poet to the poem. During the era of the New Critics, students were provided only the text of the poem, so they would not be influenced by knowledge of the poet's personality and family background. Many works have undergone reinterpretation as new theories have developed. The best examples of this revisionist exercise are Shakespeare's plays, such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Once A.C. Bradley's seminal work was treated as the pinnacle of Shakespearean criticism, but Bradley has since been challenged, revised, and pushed to antiquity by later critics armed with modern theories.

Specific texts were misinterpreted due to the beliefs of that particular age. *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley, is probably the best example of this exercise. Today, *Frankenstein* has become an essential ingredient of contemporary vocabulary to denote something sinister created by man. If a man creates something that can destroy him, it is called *Frankenstein*. Even if a person names something *Frankenstein*, it gives them goose bumps and sends shivers down their spine. The credit for giving the world such a currency goes to Mary Shelley, who wrote a romance/novel at the same time, or rather, its impact may be attributed to the misinterpretation of the same work. *Monster* and *Frankenstein* are treated as synonyms in modern usage. However, it must be understood that *Frankenstein* is treated as a monster only because of the misinterpretation of the text. This paper attempts to reinterpret the text, as the researcher feels that critics and readers have deliberately ignored specific details about the character.

The monster/*Frankenstein* appears very early in the novel. The narrator first describes him to his sister in letter.

We perceived a low carriage, fixed on a sledge and drawn by dogs, pass on towards the north, at the distance of half a mile; a being which had the shape of a man, but apparently of gigantic stature, sat in the sledge and guided the dogs. We watched the rapid progress of the traveller with our telescopes until he was lost among the distant inequalities of the ice. (15)

This description of *Frankenstein* sets the tone of the novel. The readers' curiosity arises after reading the description of the creature, which is human in shape but gigantic in stature.

The sailors on the ship who saw the Monster rescue Victor in the icy wilderness learned about the Monster's story. The readers are told that Victor belonged to an affluent and influential family in Switzerland. Victor was a genius who studied various disciplines and made a name for himself at the University. He tells: "At the end of two Years I made some discoveries in the improvement of some chemical instruments, which procured me great esteem and admiration at the University" (44).

Victor's father had taken great care to save to him from "Supernatural horrors" (45). However, Victor became interested in the problems and questions that have plagued mankind over the ages. He wanted to save mankind from old age and decay:

I saw how the fine form of man was degraded and wasted, I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming Cheek of life; I saw how the Worm inherited the wonders of the eye and the brain. (45).

Victor comes across as a learned person who has mastered many natural sciences and has improved many chemical instruments. However, he is not satisfied with all these accomplishments; he wants to free mankind from old age and disease. That is why he wants to create a living being by infusing inanimate matter with life. He is successful in achieving what he wanted to after the labour of two years: 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 with an ardour that exceeded moderation" (51).

The readers here learn why Frankenstein became synonymous with the word 'monster'. When Mary Shelley wrote the book, Darwin's *Origin of Species* was still around forty years away. England at that time was a very religious country, and atheism was a crime worse than murder. At this time, Mary Shelley wrote a book that was audacious because the general public and the intellectual class alike believed that creation was the sole domain of God. That is why if man tries to create life, then it can only be monstrous, satanic. The biggest crime Victor committed was not believing in the supernatural or God. He himself tells about his beliefs:

Darkness had no effect on my fancy, and a churchyard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life, which from being the seat of beauty and strength, had become food for the worm. (45)

The above thoughts of Victor clearly showcase him as a rational man, a person with a scientific temper and a Darwinian before Darwin. His thoughts show that he did not believe in the Gospel that showcased only God as a Creator.

These kinds of thoughts were considered blasphemous in pre-Darwinian England. The readers can realise that the noted Elizabethan Dramatist Christopher Marlowe was also bedevilled by society because of his "diabolical atheism" (qtd. in Hamlin 257). His contemporary writer Thomas Kyd also testified about Marlowe:

Moyses was but a Jugler and One Heriots being Sir Walter Raleighs man can do more that he It was an easy matter for Moyses being brought up in all the artes of the Egyptians to abuse the Jewes being a rude and grosse people (Snyder 565).

How Marlowe's thoughts about God and religion coloured the interpretation of his works is clear from the famous anecdote in William Prynne's *Historio-mastix*:

The visible apparition of the Devill on the stage at the Belsavage Play-house, in Queen Elizabeth's dayes, (to the great amazement of both of the Actors and spectators) whiles they we prophanely playing the History of Faustus (the truth of which I have heard from many who now live, who well remember it) there being some distracted with that fearful sight. (Bakeless 1938, 146-7)

It is clear that Victor's crime was even worse than Marlowe. He was not only an atheist but also a heinous blasphemer who tried to interfere in the domain of God. The *Bible* clearly states that God is the creator of everything. Revelation 4:11 Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they and existed and were created.

Genesis 1:1

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and Void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the spirit of God was hovering over the face of waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

There are many other verses in the Bible like Corinthians 8:6, Nehemiah 9:6, Romans 1:20, Psalm 33:6, Hebrews 11, 3 etc, which clearly mention that the Biblical God is the only creator. That is why Victor was a criminal in the contemporary. England and the misinterpretations of the novel were sure to follow.

It is evident that all the religious people would have thought that a man cannot create a beautiful living thing, so it has to be a monster only.

In fact, Victor himself is sure that he has committed a crime by creating a monster. He explains:

I passed the night wretchedly. Sometimes my pulse beat so quickly and hardly that I felt the palpitation of every artery at others, I nearly sank to the ground through languor and extreme weakness mingled with horror, I felt the bitterness of disappointment; dreams that had been my food and pleasant rest for so long a space were now become a hell to me, and the change was so rapid, the overthrow so complete. (52)

He quotes a stanza from Coleridge's poem "Ancient Mariner" to tell about his condition:
Like one who was, on a lonely road,
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And, having once turned around, walks on,
And turns no more his head,
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Path close behind him tread.

The above lines are essential to understanding Victor's condition of mind. These lines indicate that he has confirmed he has created a "fiend." All these lines show that Victor did not stay back with his creation because he was afraid of it. Now, because the creator himself declared that he had created a fiend, the critics and the readers were sure to follow suit.

When one reads the novel, one realises that the monster was not a deviant, satanic creature; rather, it was as vulnerable as a child. Victor should have brought it into the world and taught it how to survive. Victor left it all alone without teaching him how to survive the winters and how to quench his thirst. He says that he "felt cold" and half frightened (98). when he was left alone by Victor. He "felt light, and hunger, and thirst, and darkness" (98) without any guardian to guide him through the tough times. He learnt all by himself. Like our ancestors who knew everything all by themselves, he also taught himself to fend for himself:

One day when I was oppressed by cold, I found a fire which had been left by some wandering beggars, and was overcome with delight at the warmth I experienced from it. In my joy I thrust my hand into the live embers, but quickly drew it out again with a cry of pain. (99).

Frankenstein was a quick learner; he soon learnt that a hut could save him from "the snow and rain" (101). Moreover, it is essential to understand that Frankenstein was not unsociable like monsters. He tried to mingle with human society, but people did not accept him because of his appearance. This again makes clear that if Victor had initiated him, then he would have remained good. He was shooed away from human settlements because of his unusual appearance. He would have been accepted in the society if Victor had accompanied him. That would have laid the fears of human beings to rest, and Frankenstein would have remained among humans. He tells Victor that he has been transformed by the apathy of human beings:

Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather fallen angel, whom thou divest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good, misery made me fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous (95)

He further tells Victor, "I was benevolent; my souls glowed with love and humanity, but am I not alone, miserably alone?" (95). His soul was full of "milk of human kindness" (Macbeth) in the beginning. He was naturally good, but he was transformed by the barbarity of man" (102). He was benevolent not only in words, but his actions also show that. He lived for some time near a cottage and "longed to join them" (105), but he did not because of the bad treatment meted out to him by human beings. He, however, helped the dwellers of the cabin without thinking of anything in return:

I discovered also another means through which I was enabled to assist their labours. I found that the youth spent a great part of each day in collecting wood for the family fire, and during the night I often took his tools, the use of which I quickly discovered, and brought home firing sufficient for the consumption of several days. (107).

Frankenstein learns the language while observing them closely and refers to them as "my protectors" (114). He tries to find relations in this human family. He is troubled by a lack of ties and longs for them:

But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses; or if they had, all my past life was now a blot, a blind Vacancy in which I distinguished nothing. (117)

He spends considerable time helping the family without expecting anything in return except their patronage. He only wants acceptance among human beings.

Excellent man! I thank you and accept your generous offer. You raise me from the dust by this kindness; and I trust that, by your aid, I shall not be driven from the society and sympathy of your fellow creatures. (131)

This statement shows that Frankenstein has been misinterpreted as a monster. He was judged not according to his appearance. The problem was with the human beings, not with Frankenstein. The notions of beauty and ugliness guided human beings, and they believed that every creature deemed ugly was sinister. The blind man listened to Frankenstein

because he could not see the creature's ugliness. His children could see the beast that is why they treat him with disdain. The old man's son treats him violently:

Felix darted forward, and with supernatural force tore me from his father, to his knees I clung, in a transport of fury, the dashed forward violently me to the ground and struck me with a stick. (132)

Now, if Frankenstein were a monster, he would have easily killed Felix because he was a physical stranger, but he did not do so. Frankenstein tells the readers:

I could have torn him limb from limb, as the lion rends the antelope. But my heart sank within me as with bitter sickness, and I refrained. I saw him on the point of repeating his blow when, overcome by pain and anguish, I quitted the Cottage, and in the great tumult escaped unperceived to my hovel. (132)

This response confirms that he is not a monster. He does not use his power even after being insulted.

In another incident, he saves a girl from drowning in a river. However, he is treated badly by human beings. The relatives of the girl try to shoot him. This bad behaviour of the human beings pushes him "to hellish rage and Vengeance to all mankind" (138). He also makes clear that he did not intend to kill Victor's brother. He was killed accidentally:

The child still struggled and loaded me with epithets which carried despair to my heart; I grasped his throat to silence him, and in a moment he lay dead at my feet. (139)

Thus it is clear that Frankenstein was not as evil as interpreted by the critics; rather, he has been a victim of misinterpretation. It can be easily understood as Dr. Faustus also suffered the same fate in the hands of the Elizabethan critics. Dr Faustus sold his soul to the Devil not for personal aggrandizement; rather, he did so to do beneficial acts for society, but these aspects of Dr Faustus have mainly been ignored by the critics. For instance, he wanted to drape the school children in silk:

I'll have them fill the public-schools with silk,
Where with the students shall be bravely clad (32)

In the same utterances, he appears as a patriot. For instance, he invokes Satan for the benefit of Germany.
I'll have them wall all Germany with brass
And make swift Rhine Circle fair Wurttemberg (13).

All the interpretations of Dr. Faustus and Frankenstein bedevil them, but when read in proper context, it is clear that they were not devils as portrayed by the contemporary critics.

Thus, it is clear that Frankenstein was not a devil as interpreted. The changes in his character came only because humans shunned him.

The fault, in fact, lay with human beings who judged him based on his looks, rather than his nature. The fault also lies with Victor, his creator, who shunned him after creating him.

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