

The Human Condition of Frankenstein's Monster

"What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?

These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them." -*Frankenstein's Monster*

The theme of self-recognition and integration of the self in society is explored at length, along with themes of creation, purpose and the ethics of the creator/creation relationship in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Jacques Lacan articulates the issue of the recognition of the self and how the development of sentience has a correlation to how one learns, interacts with the world and how they identify the idea of 'self' in his essay "The Mirror State as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience". He uses the terms, 'imagos', 'mirror stage' and 'gestalt' to classify the devices and mental checkpoints one must pass in order to make a connection between the self and reality. Shelley helped mother the science-fiction genre with *Frankenstein* not only by creating a story that integrates science as a crucial literary device, but by setting the framework for what extreme scientific advancement says about the human code of ethics. The obvious consequence of this is the conundrum of whether or not humans can be responsible for creating life and what that responsibility entails.

The development of the self is important because one has to know the self before it can figure out how it must behave in society; this was perfectly personified in the Monster's discovery of himself in *Frankenstein*. Despite being abandoned by his 'father' Victor Frankenstein, the Monster was able to complete his mirror stage, find his imagos and figure out how he could best fit into human society.

All living things procreate for the advancement of the species, but humans are the only species that procreate and have to acknowledge and cope with their sentience at length. Human children rely on their parents for everything until they are capable enough to function

independently, but the most crucial time in the parent/child relationship is in the formative years of life. These notions are all second nature to humans when it comes to raising children, but become cloudier when similar issues arise when life is created by unnatural means. In the case of Victor and the Monster, Victor is the Monster's *creator*. This alone creates an interesting dichotomy by setting Victor up to be a kind of 'god-like' figure (he's solely responsible for the Monster's life) as well as creates the inherent role of father (he is a human who ideally, would teach the monster about being human) because the Monster is a sentient humanoid and therefore, is entitled to x amount of human experience, which includes human parental guidance. The Monster is technically an adult, but he was mentally a newborn child upon his creation, that Victor has paternal responsibilities towards, if only because the Monster also has no mother (Victor pieced him together, foregoing intrauterine gestation, breastfeeding and depriving the Monster of a maternal figure). The Monster didn't have a physical infancy stage and he didn't have any parental figure to rear him through it or teach him basic survival and developmental cues, so he had to discover his mirror image, imagos and experience gestalt all by himself. While these concepts aren't impossible to grasp on one's own, having a sentient parent makes them much easier to learn. The human experience truly starts when one becomes sentient, which can begin with the 'mirror stage'.

Shelley writes a literal mirror scene in the text when the Monster discovers his reflection in a pool of water and creates his 'mirror image' and 'imagos' in chapter twelve.

“I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers... but how was I terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became

fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification,” (78-79)

One cannot only refer to imagos for identity; it is how one recognizes oneself AND how they are recognized by others. Only accepting one or the other creates a stilted image of the self (resulting in either a resentment of the self for being unable to adapt to society or a forsaking of the personal identity for the sake of fitting into society). The Monster realized that he was terrifying via his reflection and became overcome with embarrassment which led him to a mental resignation of himself to isolation. It should be argued that if the Monster had someone to help him understand the unusual circumstances of his creation and why he looks the way he does, he would have been able to, at the very least, be understood by someone and therefore be a little more at peace with himself (or as long as he felt accepted by someone regardless of his creation and/or appearance). It's the job of the parent to teach a child what they are in the context of human culture. The Monster's only immediate frame of reference of humanity to compare himself to, was the De Lacy family he secretly observed after he went into hiding. While these people cannot be classified as 'parents' they are almost entirely responsible for how the Monster became intelligent.

Returning to the idea that the Monster is mentally a child, it's worth noting that he certainly learns like one; he learns about collecting firewood, clearing the snow, etc. from watching the brother. He essentially mirrors how he understands these functions likely because he sees himself capable enough to perform them (this possibly would have changed if he was a female or he observed a different family) and because he sees that they benefit the family in one way or another (Ex. Clearing the snow makes it easier for the family to walk along the road). He

also learns about compassion and sympathy from the De Lacys as well as from the books he found in his hiding.

“ I learned, from the views of social life which it developed, to admire their virtues and to deprecate the vices of mankind. As yet I looked upon crime as a distant evil... inciting within me a desire to become an actor in the busy scene where so many admirable qualities were called forth and displayed...I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar yet at the same time strangely unlike to the beings concerning whom I read and to whose conversation I was a listener. I sympathized with and partly understood them, but I was unformed in mind; I was dependent on none and related to none... and there was none to lament my annihilation.” (89)

Paradise Lost is amongst the books he learns from and identifies himself with Lucifer as the misunderstood protagonist forsaken by his creator, which could arguably be construed as a second kind of mirror stage in that he recognizes himself via a projected image. The Monster claims to be a benevolent creature until he experiences the pain of loneliness and scorn from humans, but he still wants to be a part of human life. He wants to make further sense of his existence and wants to understand the implications of his creation because he was deprived of it during his ‘infancy’. Eventually, he begs Victor for a female companion of similar creation so he can at least feel less alone in life. He reasons that having someone to understand him will ease his pain, but it would also complete his gestalt via the recognition from someone of the same species (Lacan).

One of the most brilliant themes in *Frankenstein* is what it means to be human. The Monster and Victor illustrate both sides of the ‘meaning of existence’ coin in their own way. Victor

concerns himself with the scientific implications of how and why life exists (e.g. '*What* is life?'). More often than not however, the Monster shows more tangible humanity than Victor (Victor's human moments and lack thereof better serve arguments regarding the human capacity for curiosity and abandonment of ethics in the face of scientific progress). The Monster learns, understands pain, craves companionship and even contemplates his existence (e.g. '*Why* is life?'). The Monster has an immense sense of personal empathy and awareness, despite his abandonment. He doesn't thrust blame onto anyone for his appearance, nor does he feel entitled to sympathy from others (if only because he reasons that sympathy begets x amount of reciprocity that he's been neglected thus far). Rather, he takes it upon himself to prove that his gentle and intelligent nature can overcome his outward appearance. He understands that he can't change his appearance and consequently, the way most people will react to him, so he thinks of alternate ways to be accepted by other humans. The depth of this 'gestalt' would likely come after copious introspection and a particularly equitable perspective on human society. The Monster has achieved both of these things in a manner of two years, which is not only remarkable, but shows that anyone is capable of meaningful self-reflection. Shelley makes it abundantly clear that the monster is capable of intricate thought, awareness and commiseration without Victor's help, via his understanding of his and Victor's role in his life as well as his capacity to learn and be curious. The Monster momentarily sympathizes with Victor as his de facto father and creator, (despite his being abandoned as a malformed creation estranged from human society) and asks him to hear his tale to understand his side of the story before 'passing judgement' on him. The Monster is afraid for his life, despite being lonely and ostracized and makes a last ditch effort to gain his creator's compassion. He begs Victor to at least give him the

time of day because he realizes that Victor owes him that much as his creator and because he knows that he craves thoughtful human interaction and recognition as a human being.

There are few works in the English canon that create and carry the metaphysical and psychological thematic weight that *Frankenstein* does. Shelley created a genre that can ask the ‘big questions’ of life in an extremely engaging and intelligent way. Literature as a whole allows the reader to learn without being taught, and Shelley opened the door to teaching metaphysics and ethics with and without human bias. All of the themes shown in *Frankenstein* together are greater than the sum of their parts, much like the monster.