

Frankenstein's Creature: Monstrous Chicken or Grotesque Egg?

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Abstract

Some scholars believe that due to the negligence of Victor in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* the creature became an attention-craving murderous monster. Other scholars believe that the unaffectionate and unnatural way Victor birthed the creature caused his monstrous form. The argument over "Nature versus Nurture" in relation to the creations is irrelevant, however. The creature is only pushed away by Victor due to his hideousness which stems from the environment in which the creature was born. Victor's societal view on nature and its connection to womanly attributes creates a paradox of a loveless creation and an affection-craving creature within the novel.

Keywords

Philosophy, Feminism, Feminist, Frankenstein, Mary Shelley

Cover Page Footnote

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Frankenstein's Creature: Monstrous Chicken or Grotesque Egg? - *Alexandria B. Acero, Gettysburg College*

Mary Shelley's life was saturated with feminist ideologies because of her upbringing and influence from her father, William Godwin, and her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft. Shelley viewed the patriarchy negatively because she was nurtured in an environment that criticized society. Shelley's background influenced the themes of womanhood and childbirth throughout *Frankenstein*. She used Victor Frankenstein to voice her criticisms against society's separated spheres of influence and the concept of "joyous" motherhood; her criticisms are essential to understanding the argument over nature versus nurture. The argument consists of two sides: nature, which believes that Victor's transgression on nature by forming the Creature is why he is malignant, and nurture, which believes that the Creature becomes malicious due to Victor's abandonment. Victor Frankenstein's transgression against nature is due to his sexist characterization that nature is feminine and passive. Victor's views on and transgressions against nature reflect how he treats women in the novel. His domination over nature is due to his fear of feminine empowerment and sexuality, and this fear guides him to his formation and abandonment of the Creature. The nature versus nurture argument should be intertwined to create a fuller understanding of the underlying messages within the novel. Both Rahner and Mitchell believe Shelley's life heavily influenced the novel and although this aspect is greatly contested, Shelley's experiences with motherhood are essential to understanding the topic of motherhood in *Frankenstein*.

During the time of Frankenstein's production, new revelations came forth about Shelley's family. First, her half-sister, Fanny, came from an affair rather than Shelley's established parents and committed suicide after finding out of her illegitimacy. Second, Percy's first wife drowned herself after realizing she was pregnant with another man's child. Third, her daughter, Clara, who was born from an affair between Shelley and Percy died young. Last, her other daughter, Clara, was born after her first daughter's death and around the time Frankenstein was nearing its end (Rahner, 2-3). Shelley's traumatic experiences possibly influenced the themes within

Frankenstein, but due to societal expectations of women, proper female writers were expected to target female audiences with education on proper behavior.

Shelley's experiences with separated gendered spheres influence the major themes of the novel. Her liberal opinions stemmed from her family. Her mother was a feminist who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, and her father was a political philosopher and journalist (Rahner, 2). Mary Shelley, like her mother before her, wrote about more masculine topics such as philosophy, science, and theology, which are meant to be taken with authority. Because her topics were rooted in the intellectual sphere rather than the emotional sphere, to be taken seriously and to avoid unnecessary sexist criticism, she published it anonymously. Through the assumed voice of a man, Shelley was able to seriously critique the patriarchy, separated spheres of influence, and motherhood as she experienced them without the public realizing the novel's underlying themes. The unawareness caused then-popular speculation that Percy was the true author, even when Shelley revealed herself. It was believed to be impossible for a woman to create a work of literature so "masculine" (Rahner, 5-8). The spheres of influence in the 19th century drew a harsh line between what was expected by men and what was expected by women, and women who did not follow the social order were harassed, feared, and condemned.

These separate spheres of influence Shelley experienced reflect in *Frankenstein* because expectations for women affect the characters and influence their actions. Women do not have the same freedoms their male counterparts have within the story. They are restricted to the home; Caroline, Elizabeth, and Justine are placed in occupations that fit the narrative that women are nurturing, loving animals. Their only purpose is to serve others, especially their family and their children (Mellor, 3). They are caretakers, wives, or servants. The men are highly aware of the restrictions they give women, as Alphonse tries to end Elizabeth's rebuttals on her little brother's occupation. He suggests that she "ought to be an advocate" (Shelley, 41). This job is supposed to remind Elizabeth that her gender restrains her to the home rather than intellectual public spaces, and characterizes women as unintelligent because of their caring nature. Caroline Beaufort even dies because of her desire to nurture a sick Elizabeth back to health. Her death seems frivolous and nonsensical. She could no longer "debar herself from her society... and the consequences of this impudence were fatal" (Shelley, 25). Victor believes that care and

nurture have no place in his societal sphere, he even considers Caroline's care to be brazen. His disdain shows the negative connotation of nurture within Victor's masculine, intellectual sphere. Too much compassion would lead to one's downfall. Just like Caroline, Elizabeth's emotions are irrational. She is unintelligent and undeserving of masculine privileges because of her feminine characteristics. When Victor and Henry Clerval are about to leave, she "wept" and wished Victor to be "happy and tranquil" when he comes back (Shelley, 110). Elizabeth also mentions that she had the chance to "[enlarge] her experience" and "[cultivate] her understanding," suggesting that she is unable to go with her fiancé because of societal constraints (Shelley, 110). In this scene, Victor is intentionally framing her to be undeserving of opportunity because of her empathetic nature. Yet, when Henry is given feminine traits, like nursing Victor back to health, Victor sees him as his "friend and dearest companion" (Shelley, 115). Women are restrained due to their gender, while men are able to freely express themselves.

Victor's fears of female sexuality and empowerment come to a climax during his destruction of the female Creature. He expects women to be submissive but believes that without society, the female Creature "might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighbourhood of man and hide himself in deserts, but she had not.... who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation. They might even hate each other... She also might turn with disgust from him to the superior beauty of man... and he be again alone, exasperated by the fresh provocation of being deserted by one of his own species... one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth..." (Shelley, 118-119).

Victor believes that even without society's restraints, the female Creature would keep the personality of a "woman." She would be too emotional to think as coherently, like his first Creature, and murder those around her. Victor fears the female Creature's freedom of choice, a right that women do not have in his society. The female Creature would not be a servant or caretaker to the Creature, and she would not be easily dominated. She does not expect her counterpart to control her, as Victor does to all the other women he knows. He is, lastly, concerned about her sexuality: if left alone, she would be able to reproduce with his Creature without his control. Her freedom and strength subvert patriarchal expectations, and therefore she would be the "enemy of values"

(JanMohamed quotes in Mitchell, 40). Victor's abortion of the female Creature shows an insecure need for male dominance stemming from his fear of feminine power.

Victor's relationship with Henry Clerval enforces Victor's fear of a woman's bodily autonomy, rather than femininity itself. Henry's feminine interests allow him to be seen as Victor's "beloved friend" (Shelley, 111). Victor's affection for Henry is similar to a young schoolgirl in love. He describes in detail the eyes of his friend; they are "the dark orbs covered by the lids, and the long black lashes that fringed them" (Shelley, 131). His relationship with Henry is romantic and his friendship with him allows Victor to be "the same happy creature who, a few years ago, loving and beloved by all, had no sorrow or care" (Shelley, 45). Overall, Victor finds Henry to be his physical and mental equal and his "soul mate" (Mellor, 12). When his "dearest Henry" dies, Victor's "human frame could no longer support the agonizing suffering that" he endured, and "a fever succeeded" his angst (Shelley, 127). Victor wishes that he died instead of Henry, as he is now "more miserable than man ever was before" (Shelley, 127). His love for Henry is consistent. Before and after Henry's death, Victor praises him for being a wonderful friend and has the strongest emotional reactions to Henry's presence. Victor's fear of female empowerment and sexuality disallows him to create deep relationships with the surrounding women, only when they are of the same gender is when any lasting sentiments are formed.

Victor's friendship with Henry is more caring and emotional than his relationship with his lover, Elizabeth. He finds Elizabeth to be his "favorite animal" and "a possession of [his] own" (Shelley, 20). He sees her as an object to "tend" to and look down upon, rather than a human being with similar intelligence and interests (Shelley, 20). Elizabeth's death is, also, less heartbreaking. When he "saw her, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair," he rushes to embrace "her with ardour; but the deathly languor and coldness of the limbs told me, that what I now held in my arms had ceased to be the Elizabeth whom I had loved and cherished" and hang "over her in the agony of despair" after he woke up from his faint (Shelley, 140-141). Victor's description of her body is similar to a description of a woman right after sex: haphazardly on the bed with messy hair. It is only when Victor realizes that she is nothing but a dead body that he can look at her sexually. Not once has he described any action with Elizabeth as enthusiastic

or passionate previous to her death. Before the wedding, Elizabeth even questions whether he loves her at all. Moments earlier to her death, he “earnestly entreated her to retire.” (Shelley, 140). Victor fears Elizabeth’s sexuality that he refuses to go into the bedroom with her during their honeymoon, and causes her death. If Victor were to consummate their marriage, he would lose his domination over Elizabeth, because her uninhibited sexuality would threaten the construct of masculine authority. Rather than showing Elizabeth romantic and sexual desire, her sexuality and her ability to reproduce are violently destroyed within the bedroom, a stereotypical place of consummation, so that he could protect his dominant role. The juxtaposition of Victor’s relationship with Henry and his relationship with Elizabeth shows Victor’s inability to earnestly love a sexually liberated woman.

Victor’s construction of the Creature, which is a transgression against Nature, is due to his nature: his fear of female empowerment and sexuality. Victor is the mouthpiece of sexist scientific beliefs, and his transgression is a cautionary tale not to go against the will of nature. He feminizes nature as he chases “nature to her hiding-places” (Shelley, 35). Victor’s conviction that women are passive and docile is applied to the natural world. Because of this assumption, Victor removes all womanly attributes during his formation of the Creature. When Victor goes to a churchyard, a place merely a “receptacle of bodies deprived of life” and “beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life,” he removes the societal importance of women because he is recreating life through reanimating body parts rather than pregnancy (Shelley, 33). Victor’s fear leads him to go against nature and removes the female body during procreation.

Nature rebukes Victor’s narrative and seeks revenge. During Victor’s unnatural pregnancy, he experiences mood swings, his “enthusiasm was checked by [his] anxiety,” while “[his] person became emancipated” and “oppressed by a strong fever... [his] cheeks turned pale” (Shelley, 33-35). Victor’s ailments are caused by Nature. Through her, Victor is forced to experience birth’s downfalls, and she decides that an “unnatural method of reproduction” should produce “an unnatural being” (Mellor, 11). Victor’s newly-formed child has a “shriveled complexion and straight black lips” (Shelley, 35). Victor’s need to control the female body is given consequences as he and his child experience Nature’s punishment.

The Creature becomes a woman-murdering monster because of Victor's nature. The Creature influences Justine's and causes Elizabeth's deaths. Justine, William Frankenstein's caretaker, is framed by the Creature and killed for the murder of William, while Elizabeth is killed by him on her honeymoon. The Creature removes all the leftover maternal figures within the novel and removes Victor's ability to naturally procreate. The Creature is used as a subconscious tool for Victor to remove his fears of female empowerment and sexuality.

Because Victor uses his Creature as a weapon against the natural maternal figures, he becomes the only maternal figure. This causes tension between Victor and his Creature, as Victor must act in a way he believes is below him. To fully nurture a new species of human, Victor "must be emasculated and transform himself as a woman" (Freud quoted in Mitchell, 40). This is problematic for Victor, as his ideologies and fears are ingrained within the separated social spheres. The "blurring of gender" would force Victor to be both within the superior masculine, intelligent sphere, and the inferior feminine, emotional sphere (Mitchell, 40). Even though Victor strives to birth a new species of human, the fear created by his machismo ideologies prevents him from being "emasculated" (being affectionate and loving to his Creature) and taking the social role of motherhood.

Frankenstein critiques birth, conception, death, and the realities of postpartum trauma. The novel represents Shelley's experiences with motherhood. Rather than showcasing birth as a wonderful time filled with love and excitement for a new life, the conception of the Creature is physically and mentally draining on Victor, and intertwined with death. When Victor finishes the Creature, he was already "oppressed by a strong fever" and "emancipated" (Shelley, 33-35). Victor's state during his pregnancy reveals the realities of child-rearing. Rather than exciting and beautiful, it is exhausting and leaves one feeling empty. Like Victor, all of a pregnant woman's energy, thoughts, time, and nutrients go to the growing child rather than to herself. When his Creature is finally brought to life, he is overpowered by negative emotions and immediately rejects his child. This is evidence of postpartum trauma, as new mothers commonly have depression and anxiety after giving birth (Rahner, 9). Shelly's trauma is evident from the Creature's conception from the bodies in the graveyard (Shelley, 33-35). Her second daughter, Clara, was named after the first after Clara died (Rahner, 2). The Creature's birth combines life and death, similar to how the second Clara's life is formed and intentionally made to be a continuation of her first late

daughter's life. The Creature's birth is also correlated to her mother's death caused by Shelley's birth. Since Shelley experienced deaths caused by the creation of new life, the Creature is intentionally made to be malignant. He represents the unfortunate circumstances of Shelley's motherhood and the realities of child-rearing during the 19th-century.

Victor rejecting his Creature is a subversion and critique of the doting, loving mother. During Victor's creation period, he is meticulous about which body parts are selected to make his Creature. He recalls making sure that each part of him is attractive during the assemblage. When the Creature is finally brought to life, he is refused love and rejected by Victor because of his ugly appearance. This is similar to how new young mothers react to their child: threatened. The Creature's appearance is a physical representation of Victor's perception of him after his rejection. The act of rejecting the child represents postnatal trauma. Victor does not even know the creation and yet, like all new mothers, is forced to take care and nurture the child. His trauma forbids Victor to nurture his child, which causes the Creature's future revenge. It is ironic that Victor agrees to create another Creature but violently destroys it. His agreement to force his Creature to leave him alone, "a subversion of the typical 'family romance,'" where the mother wants to prevent her child from leaving (Mitchell, 42). Yet, the second Creature's destruction is Victor's unwillingness to separate from his child, like his mother was separated from him. Like a mother, Victor is ashamed that he could not control his child's actions, but trying to do so is impossible because the Creature is "not in communication" (Mitchell, 42). Even though the Creature can speak and communicate through words, he and Victor cannot communicate their wants or emotions with each other because of Victor's disgust. Victor's lack of control reflects Shelley's shame of her lack of control over her children and their tragic deaths. Victor's rejection of his Creature doubles as Shelley's critique of societal expectations on motherhood, as it shows that not all maternal experiences are full of whimsy and excitement.

The Creature becomes a malicious monster because of Victor's lack of compassion and rejection of his creation. This is shown through the Creature's desire to have a similar life to the De Lacey family. Even though the De Laceys do not have much in terms of money or food. Their relationship with each other and Safie shows the Creature that he could be loved and nurtured. When the Creature is ultimately rejected, he becomes angry

because none of the people he cares about are willing to care for him. The Creature's last desperate plea for love and attention comes in the terms of another Creature. He "demand[s] a creature of another sex... [they] shall be monsters, cut off from all of the world" (Shelley, 102). The Creature's only asked to be loved. He wants someone similar to him because it is the only way they could be equals and that he would not be rejected again. When Victor destroyed his female creation, this told the Creature that Victor believes that his child does not deserve love. This last transgression against the Creature forces him to torture Victor. If he cannot nurture and love, then he should not be given love either. The Creature ends Victor's life to get rid of any compassion his creator receives. Victor's elimination of the maternal figures causes his downfall as he is unwilling to love the Creature and the Creature seeks revenge.

Victor's fears of female empowerment and sexuality arise from his suppressive and divided society. His fear caused him to refuse to nurture the Creature because nurturing him would force Victor to align with the seemingly lesser feminine sphere. His fear becomes his nature, which transmutes into the Creature's nature. Victor's nature influences how he nurtures the Creature. Due to Victor's nature, he trains the Creature to eliminate all of Victor's natural maternal rivals through not nurturing the Creature at all. Victor's fear is a critique of the separate spheres within 19th-century society. It stems from the expectation that women should be submissive, emotional, and inferior to men. Such fear affects the relationship between Victor and the Creature. This relationship is a critique of motherhood during the 19th-century. Victor does not nurture the Creature and his emotions about his child is an inverse of the expectation of motherhood. Victor's fears stemming from his patriarchal expectations critique 19th-century expectations of women and the believed consensus on what motherhood is like.

The nature argument believes that the Creature was born malignant because his formation broke the laws of nature. The nurture argument believes that Victor's lack of compassion for the Creature causes him to become malignant. Neither side takes into account the beliefs and fears of Victor. Victor's nature is important to understand the Creature's nature, as his beliefs and fears influence not only how he would react to the Creature but how the Creature is made. Mary Shelley's life influencing the themes of the novel dictates how Victor acts

and what he is afraid of. Victor's nature is an important influence on nature and nurture because the book is focused more on his life rather than the Creature's.

Frankenstein shows that it is not nature *versus* nurture, but nature *and* nurture. Victor deciding to transgress against nature and build a creature out of dead body parts is due to his fear of female empowerment and sexuality. His fears affect the way he nurtures the Creature. Victor's nature becomes the Creature's nature because he is single-handedly creating his child. Because Victor's society influences his nature, it influences the Creature's nature, which influences Victor's nurture. Both sides of the argument are lacking, as nature and nurture are cyclical. Nature and nurture are not against each other, rather, they have tension. Nature and nurture are seemingly at opposing ends but impact each other.

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