

Analysis of “Frankenstein” by Mary Shelley : Morality Without God

Throughout *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, knowledge of the existence of a creator has a crippling effect on the creature as he struggles to reconcile his own perception of himself with his maddening desire for divine approval and acceptance. It is impossible to ignore the author's place within her text as Shelly, an avowed atheist, makes a comparison of human development through the contrary means of both religious and secular/humanistic relationships. In the end, through *Frankenstein*, Shelley concludes that moral and spiritual development can best be attained through the shedding of dogmatic belief structures, resulting in the elimination of God towards the attainment of self-realization.

Frankenstein's creature is a testament to this theory as his education and growth follow several divergent paths throughout his short existence, resulting at the last in the freedom of the creature through the death of his creator. Strangely, although the secular theme is continued throughout the text, the religious references and biblical allusions cannot be ignored and are a complex addition to a text that could otherwise be viewed as a secular treatise on the dangerous nature of knowledge. Although it would be simple to pare the text down to such non-religious terms, it cannot be ignored that *Frankenstein* contains a great deal of biblical symbolism, particularly the theme of the outcast and the story of creation. “The creature is bitter and dejected after being turned away from human civilization, much the same way that Adam in “[Paradise Lost](#)” was turned out of the Garden of Eden. One difference, though, makes the monster a sympathetic character, especially to contemporary readers. In the biblical story, Adam causes his own fate by sinning. His creator, Victor, however, causes the creature's hideous existence, and it is this grotesqueness that leads to the creature's being spurned. Only after he is repeatedly rejected does the creature become violent and decide to seek revenge” (Mellor 106). This creation allegory is made clear from the beginning with the epigraph from John Milton's [Paradise Lost](#) (1667), which begins the novel. Despite the lack of cultivation and learning in the morals and ethics of Christianity, the monster in *Frankenstein* is able to form his own code of behavior based on example and the behavior he views from others. It should be noted that his instinctive sense of morality comes without knowledge of God or a creator and while this may seem to be an atheistic or at least secular way of thinking about how morality is “inborn” it is

impossible to ignore the way the bible and religious learning influence even this aspect of the story. Consider the moment when, much like the prodigal son in the bible, the monster in *Frankenstein* is reduced to sleep with the pigs and live like an animal. Although both the prodigal son and the monster are on the verge of starvation, they choose not to kill and eat the pigs that keep them company. The prodigal son will not eat them for religious reasons. The monster will not eat them for moral reasons, and explained in one of the [important quotes from Frankenstein](#) by Mary Shelley, “My food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb and the kid to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment” (157) Without the “voice of god” or other commandments the monster is able to discern moral right and wrong. “Like most of the writers in her literary circle, from Lord [Byron](#) to Doctor Polidori, Mary Shelley—self-educated and one of the best-read women of her time—was intrigued by old tales and ancient myths concerning lost and outcast wanderers. Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son fits perfectly into the Romantic notion of the isolated soul, the tortured, wandering loner who is, by fate or circumstance, cast adrift on a sea of loneliness and despair. In chapter 11 of *Frankenstein*—the first chapter narrated exclusively by the monster—there is a very subtle yet unmistakable allusion to Christ’s parable” (Thompson 192).

In the creature’s earliest days of life, he struggles with the concept of humanity and what it is to be human. His new and unexplained existence places him in an introspective and indefinite state of inquisitiveness. As he explains to Frankenstein in their first meeting, “I admired virtue and good feelings and loved the gentle manners and amiable qualities of my cottagers, but I was shut out from intercourse with them, except through means which I obtained by stealth, when I was unseen and unknown, and which rather increased than satisfied the desire I had of becoming one among my fellows”(124). The creature is imbued with conflicting desires. He idealizes the emotions and interactions of the cottagers, yet is unsure of his place among them. The creature utilizes his observations of the cottagers to create his own ideals of humanity. At this point in the text, the creature still reflects a kind of kinship with those he is observing. It would seem that the creature views other people as closer to God, not simply because of his own isolation, but because he witnesses their apparent ability to function in a world of God. This not only comments on the creature’s act of acquiring a sense of morality through observation, but more importantly it is a rewriting of the Cain and Abel story from the [Old Testament](#). However, since this study seeks to separate the religious from the secular, this tale has been skewed slightly as the creature cannot be distinctly connected to neither Cain nor Abel as he wanders lonely about the earth with a separation from his creator. Like Cain he is shunned and cast off by humanity and divine influence and like Abel he is the victim of desire that itself is separated from God as well—in this case a dangerous desire of knowledge (Victor’s act of playing God).

In *Frankenstein* the creature's desire to be accepted and assimilated is apparent when he speaks further of his feelings towards the cottagers. "The more I saw of them, the greater became my desire to claim their protection and kindness; my heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures; to see their sweet looks directed towards me with affection was the utmost limit of my ambition"(128). The creature reflects in these words a sense of simplistic desire, uncorrupted as yet by the malevolent and reactionary forces that will later come to shape his existence. His desire to be a part of the cottagers' lives, to have them accept him and even love him, illustrates a tangible connection felt between the creature and the rest of humanity. The creature goes on to say, in one of the [important quotes from Frankenstein by Mary Shelley](#), "I required kindness and sympathy; but I did not believe myself utterly unworthy of it"(128). The creature believes himself capable and even worthy of both emotional and psychological reciprocation and, by extension, capable of existing in harmony with the rest of humankind.

In an attempt to further his capacity for human interaction and thereby define his place in society, the creature in *Frankenstein* educates himself on morals and vices. "I read of men concerned in public affairs, governing or massacring their species. I felt the greatest ardor for virtue rise within me, and abhorrence for vice, as far as I understood the signification of those terms, relative as they were, as I applied them, to pleasure and pain alone"(125). The creature develops his own sense of morality without the influence of religion or the creator mythology. His standards are human and reactionary, based solely on the senses of "pleasure and pain", yet they are crucial and significant to his development. As he wrestles with ideas of right and wrong, good and evil, he comes closer to sating his desire for acceptance and integration into society. Of the cottagers, the creature goes on to say, "Such was the history of my beloved cottagers. It impressed me deeply. I learned, from the views of social life which it developed, to admire their virtues and to deprecate the vices of mankind"(124). This passage signifies one of the few positive influences of humankind on the creature. Through their unknowing example, the cottagers serve the creature as teachers, imparting a sense of morality and virtuous behavior through simple human interaction.

It is evident from these examples from *Frankenstein* that the creature is capable of learning moral and virtuous behavior without the influence of spiritual or divine proclamation. The presence of a bible or other religious scripture is conspicuously absent from his education, yet he is capable of developing a thoroughly structured sense of morality and ethics. His "ardor for virtue" and "abhorrence for vice" is a basis for strong intellectual development, as well as being instrumental in positive human relations, the end goal of the creature's self-education. In considering this, one must also question whether this apparent "closeness" to god on the part of the cottagers is a result of their society and civilization as opposed to a difference between the creature and the

villagers. “*Shelley’s* monster is not evil by inherent constitution. He is born unformed—carrying the predispositions of human nature, but without the specific manifestations that can only be set by upbringing and education. He is the Enlightenment’s man of hope, whom learning and compassion might mold to goodness and wisdom. But he is also a victim of [post-Enlightenment pessimism](#) as the cruel rejection of his natural fellows drives him to fury and revenge” (Gould 14). It is human interaction (and the lack thereof) that ultimately drives the creature beyond his limits, not evil borne of the absence of God or knowledge of his existence. Considering the fact that the creature lives outside the bounds of civilized society, and thus lacks the enculturation that contributes to a sense of community to help ease the “awesome” thought and perceived conception of God, it becomes clear that Shelley may be trying to relate the idea that only through society and interaction with others (or better put, civilization) can a human being grapple with the enormity of God.

The sudden and drastic change in the creature arises with the discovery of Frankenstein’s journal. Upon learning of his “creator” and the foul circumstances surrounding his creation, the creature proclaims in one of the important quotes from *Frankenstein*, “Everything is related in them which bears reference to my accursed origin; the whole detail of that series of disgusting circumstances which produced it is set in view; the minutest description of my odious and loathsome person is given, in language which painted your own horrors and rendered mine indelible. I sickened as I read. ‘Hateful day when I received life’”(126)! This is a strong departure from the hopeful and optimistic creature that arose earlier in the text. When confronted with the sordid details of his own creation, as well as the flatly horrific comments of Frankenstein, the creature regresses quickly into a negative and self-deprecating appraisal of himself.

Confronted with proof of a higher power, a “creator”, the creature begins to doubt his own values and instead adapts those of Frankenstein. From this moment forth, the creature abandons his sense of morality that was so carefully developed over time and becomes fixated instead upon the beliefs of his creator. On the other hand, there is the issue of the creator himself, Victor. Once critic observes that, “*Frankenstein* is a product of a period in which the secularization of society placed human beings at the center of the universe. The freedom to pursue independent thought and action however also shifted the responsibility for life’s outcomes away from God and Satan. And onto the shoulders of human beings. Victor’s “monster” is thus not a form of heavenly retribution for daring to “play God.” as many have suggested. The text indicates that whether there is a God or not, Victor is responsible for his own behavior, and ultimately for the deaths of those he loves. His struggle is not with his Creator, but with his own ego. Out of this first assumption comes the primary theme of the novel: With knowledge comes personal

responsibility; the denial of responsibility leads to tragic outcomes” (Nocks 138).

The creature becomes more obsessed with Frankenstein as time passes. He questions the values he has learned up until then, doubting and reworking his opinions of himself that contradict those of Frankenstein. The constant reflection on himself and the opinions of his creator drive the creature into a deep state of self-loathing. The creature becomes more and more angered as his creator, resulting in a grim obsession of revenge, continuously rebuffs him. This reaction is a furtherance of the creature’s frustration at being seemingly incapable of gaining any reaction from Frankenstein other than through the use of violence. The creature is “taught” that rage is his only tool to attract his creator’s attention. He is an unformed child in his emotional and psychological reactions to both stress and fear and he uses his anger as a means to draw responses from his creator.

The creature’s obsession is fully realized in the last chapter of Frankenstein. Upon the death of Frankenstein, the creature exclaims, “That is also my victim! In his murder my crimes are consummated; the miserable series of my being is wound to its close”(211)! In this statement, the creature expresses his final release from the cycle of death and revenge that had dominated his pursuit of Frankenstein. In the eyes of the creature, the creator is truly dead and only with the death of the creator is the creature free to once again determine his own fate. Even in choosing death for himself, an end left open to the reader’s own discretion, the creature has finally realized a freedom from uncontrollable forces and his ability to decide his own destiny without the limitations of unattainable spiritual dogma.

When posed with the question of whether or not morality can exist without knowledge of a creator and a reason to “behave” according to divine dictates, the reader must undertake a “Frankensteinian” quest of their own. It becomes necessary for us to create our own creature—not a physical one, but one of the psyche. Such a Frankensteinian quest involves a careful reassessment of the questions posed in this study, whether or not, in this complex modern world we can construct morality separated from the institutions that dictate what it should be. Perhaps in modern times, outside of the Gothic/romantic context of the novel, we also must question how modes of religious and secular belief change over time. According to one scholar, this is what “What Isaac Asimov termed ‘the *Frankenstein* complex’ the over-reacher’s conviction that his creation will turn on him and exact retribution for his contravention of natural law—is always fashionable, in the sense that it can be fashioned and refashioned to suit changing cultural anxieties. Whether or not *Frankenstein* was written as a cautionary tale, this is undoubtedly the status it has acquired in popular culture, scientific debate and feminist critique” (Goodall 26).

The question becomes whether or not modern readers who have been blinded to Shelley’s meaning through a barrage of bad film representations of the novel are ever

going to be able to see past the malformed monster itself to the deeper issues at the core of our very being. Are we, in an age of increasing secularism, reverting to the childlike innocence of the monster in a turn away from faith and God? This question is not meant to be posed in a pseudo-religious manner, it is rather put forth to call mind successive questions about how we make moral assessments without divine guidance. One might suggest that many of us are like the enterprising Victor—we are constantly surrounded with information, we crave it, it is our lives with television, the internet, radio, and other communication devices, yet also like Victor, in our pursuits of these things we have forgotten what true knowledge is. One could fairly suggest that the monster is the most pure being that has existed in literature since he is a perfect child—more perfect than an actual child since even children are inoculated against “immoral” behavior by parents. Without such guidance, perhaps it would be useful to modern readers in the Frankensteinian quest for knowledge to remember that the search is not as complex as it may seem—that the fundamental innocence lies waiting.