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The Monster in the Looking Glass:

Reflections of the Creature in *Frankenstein's* Heroines

The existing scholarship on *Frankenstein* has never provided an in-depth analysis of the implicit connections between the Creature's isolated self-perception and that of the novel's female characters. For the most part, except for the article by Cantor and Moses that links the monster with "a foreigner, an alien," Safie, the literary criticism surrounding Mary Shelley's unprecedented novel accentuated the parallels between Victor and his Creature (130). However, I assert that a more convincing comparison could be drawn if the critics considered a connection between the Creature and *Frankenstein's* secondary heroines: Safie, Elizabeth, and Justine. The mission of this paper is to fill the scholarly gap by exploring the clandestine psychological bonds between these characters and their metaphorical "reflections" in the looking glass of the narrative. I argue that the "monstrous" reflection of Frankenstein's Creature can be found in Elizabeth, Safie, and Justine because, despite the lack of explicit desire to disrupt social norms or create their own society, they share the monster's position as marginalized individuals in a patriarchal world where violence outweighs compassion. I will demonstrate how Elizabeth's abandonment, Safie's pursuit of education, and Justine's unjust death mirror the Creature's struggles and reflect the most vulnerable parts of his identity. In other words, the monster and the novel's heroines, in spite of their external differences, are fighting similar internal battles. This also results in subtle parallels between their self-perceptions.

In this way, my essay aims to uncover whether Safie's, Justine's, Elizabeth's, and the monster's identities reflect each other due to their marginal stance in a male-dominated world. By this, I mean that my work enlarges on Poovey's claim that the Creature's acute self-awareness depends on his "literal self-perception" rather than "transgression" (357). In other words, the Creature's sins or wrongdoings have nothing to do with his diminishing self-worth. On the contrary, it is the monstrous image reflecting in the eyes of humanity that makes the Creature loathe himself, "she whose resemblance I contemplated would, in regarding me, have changed that air of divine benignity to one expressive of disgust and affright" (Shelley 109). No matter how hard the Creature tries to impress someone, a single gaze ruins all his charm. Similarly, women are bound by something they cannot change in the blink of an eye—their gender—and the reflection in the mirror is a constant reminder of their place in a world ruled by men. Limited by social constraints, the "bright visions of extensive usefulness" turn into "gloomy and narrow reflections upon self" (Shelley 35).

Nevertheless, instead of focusing on "nature's mirrors," like Poovey, I will explore the "social mirror," as well as the way the monster feels isolated due to lack of unconditional love and his low social status. To prove my point, after discussing the differences and similarities between the female characters and the Creature, I will illustrate one of Poovey's "monstrous perceptions" by expanding on Victor's nightmare, where Elizabeth transforms into a corpse. Then, the essay will reference Mellor's argument concluding that *Frankenstein's* heroines feel confined in a man-crafted society and link it to Safie's story (362). Finally, I will draw on the critique of Justine's trial by Moers, who also argues that Mary Shelley "transformed gothic fiction" and created a powerful female perspective despite the seeming insignificance of the text's heroines (325).

It is essential to explore the meaning of the ultimate differences between the monster and his female counterparts before unfurling the subsequent argument about their similarities. Mary Shelley implied that the female characters are the versions of the Creature not only because she wanted to emphasize the issue of gender inequality but also due to the intricate power dynamics this choice implies. In a way, Frankenstein's monster stands for the Gothic heroine, whose struggle to uncover the mystery of "her" birth drives the novel forward. In other words, Mary Shelley demonstrated her imaginative power and liberated the genre of Gothic fiction by putting a man in a woman's shoes.

There is another thing differentiating the monster from the heroines, beyond their sex and appearances: the lack of a coherent gender role. Whereas Elizabeth, Justine, and even Safie, who strives for equal education, never question their prescribed femininity (at least, in Victor's narration), the Creature experiences a sense of utter social isolation and body dysmorphia that can be compared to a feeling of a man trapped in a woman's body. All of a sudden, he is stripped of the male privileges, and the monstrous physical appearance denies him the right to speak or be listened to by those around him. The only thing left for this grotesque being—neither a woman nor a man—is to become a silent spectator and wander in the androgynous dark. Simultaneously, the freedom from a coherent gender role allows him (because the Creature's natural or, rather, artificial sex is still male) to not play by society's rules and take advantage of the darkness he was submerged into by his Creator. In Poovey's words, the Creature is "freed from having to take a single, definitive position" (360).

The final difference is the desire for escape and separation that sets the Creature apart from *Frankenstein's* heroines. In contrast to the monster's manic idea of utter separatism, "we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world," Elizabeth, Safie, and Justine do not lose their hope to

integrate into society, however sexist and unjust it may be (Shelley 111). Doubtlessly, these vibrant differences inflect the similarities between the Creature and the female characters, turning them into mirror images of each other rather than exact copies. Their struggles are the opposite parts of a single social justice puzzle—one is a challenging life of a virtuous woman, and the other is an equally difficult path of a horrendous male. Thus, Mary Shelley demonstrated how lack of empathy, justice, and freedom ultimately ruins one as it does the other—man or woman, beast or human.

Now, I will explain the link between the Creature and Elizabeth Lavenza, who is doomed to wander in the darkest nightmares, like her atrocious counterpart. Akin to the Creature, Elizabeth appears in the novel as Victor's appendage rather than an independent being, "consider Elizabeth as my future wife" (Shelley 34). Another parallel is that she is virtually an orphan—as soon as her mother dies, her father requests Frankenstein's family "to take charge of the infant Elizabeth" (Shelley 34). Consequently, Victor becomes her only point of support, so when he departs, young, fragile Elizabeth is left with an entire household mounting on her shoulders, "she was continually endeavouring to contribute to the happiness of others, entirely forgetful of herself" (Shelley 40).

Moreover, the acute loneliness, vulnerability, and abandonment make Elizabeth painfully similar to Frankenstein's monster—both of them depend on Victor to define their "literal self-perception" (Poovey 357). Poovey claims that Frankenstein's nightmare reflects "the true meaning of his accomplishment," and Elizabeth's death stands for the demise of his Creation, as well (353). Therefore, Lavenza's gloomy appearance in Victor's dream and the transformation from a lively girl into a lifeless form mirror the monster's re-birth from a corpse into a living Creature, "her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms" (Shelley 49). It is also significant that, in Victor's dream, Elizabeth turns into his mother, another

powerful female figure in the novel, whose death is a result of compassion (caring for her ill child) rather than retribution. This is a symbolic parallel, as well—the Creature begins his life as a compassionate being, whose “soul glowed with love and humanity,” and only then descends into the dark abyss of nemesis (Shelley 79). According to Poovey, nature, time, and death form a “fatal kinship,” and a similar kinship exists between the Creature and his female shadows whose spirits fill him with their rage and hunger for revenge—thus, a “monster” becomes “the self.” (356).

Although Poovey claims that the Creature is a “self-serving” reflection of Victor’s omnipotent egotism, I would argue that the monster embodies all the fear, anger, and pain of the loved ones Victor had left behind (353). The reader can only imagine the suffering Elizabeth went through during Victor’s absence. Her profound sorrow finds its mirrored image in the pain of Frankenstein’s Creature. Elizabeth’s words, “This winter has been passed most *miserably*, tortured as I have been by anxious suspense,” correspond with the Creature’s lamentation, “but am I not alone, *miserably* alone?” (Shelley 147, 79). Both of these cries for help demand Victor’s company. Therefore, the fatal “self-absorption” that Poovey describes does not pass from Victor to the monster but turns into the monster’s absorption with his Creator, similar to Elizabeth’s ultimately fatal desire for a reunion with her fiancé (355).

Even though Safie’s dream of meeting her beloved also resulted in a catastrophe, she is the only female character whose fate may give the Creature hope. Despite her sex, neglectful father, exile from the native land, and having to learn a different language, the Turkish girl has managed to find love and compassion, aspiring to “higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit” (Shelley 97). Safie’s arrival opens the page of Enlightenment in the monster’s life, “his education runs parallel with hers” (Cantor and Moses 130). “She and I improved rapidly in the knowledge of language,” the Creature confirms, drawing an equal sign between their pronouns (Shelley 93).

This heroine and Frankenstein's monster stand in direct opposition to the "unattainable" and "self-destructive" patriarchal mentality that, according to Mellor, is trying to possess them through figures like Victor and Safie's father (368). Mellor conveys that the metaphorical "rape of nature" represented through Victor's "unnatural" work, as well as the merchant's "unnatural" protest against his daughter's love, has severe consequences (367). Without the "feminine affections and compassion," the world turns into an icy desert of evil and injustice (Mellor 363).

In accordance with Safie, who, like all female characters in the novel, is "confined" to her home, "immured within the walls of a haram," the Creature attempts to break free from the prison of his own body (Mellor 362; Shelley 97). In the end, both of them flee: Safie—to a new, better life; the Creature—from himself. Safie's last scene in the novel shows how she escapes, and the Creature soon mirrors her action—even the phrasing is similar: "rushed out of the cottage" and "quitted the cottage" (Shelley 103). The novel ends with his escape, as well: "He was soon borne away by the waves" (Shelley 166). Therefore, where Safie succeeds, her monstrous doppelgänger fails. She remains with the De Lacey family while the Creature continues his path alone. Despite being compassionate by nature, the monster becomes evil due to a lack of reciprocal empathy. Akin to the foreign girl whose pursuit of education and love was severely punished, the Creature has no example to follow, no positive role model, and, to quote Mellor, "no place in history" (364).

Due to her abusive mother and the unfair court trial, Justine internalizes a criminal mindset, similarly to the Creature who, after being harassed and neglected by Victor, faces marginalization and injustice due to the crime before nature that was committed by Frankenstein, not his monster. Justine's path of a falsely accused martyr is a reflection of the Creature's metaphoric self as the "fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed"—the only difference being that he is accused of his mere existence (Shelley 79). In consonance with Ellen Moers, I propose that

Frankenstein is a “phantasmagoria of the nursery” (330). After all, it is the “revulsion against newborn life,” as Moers calls it, that guides the actions (or, rather, inaction) of Victor Frankenstein and Justine’s mother (325). “Through a strange perversity, her mother could not endure her” and “treated her very ill”—once again, this utter lack of love is referred to as something unnatural, “perverse” (Shelley 54). The intricate parent-child interactions become the backbone of Mary Shelley’s novel and transfer directly to the Creature and Justine, who have been explicitly rejected by their caregivers. Moers illustrates how Victor’s overt repulsion towards his monster and the hatred that Justine’s mother feels towards her daughter become the “strange perversity,” an absence of love that rejects all laws of nature (330). In tune with Victor’s accusations of his Creature, Justine’s mother “accused her of having caused the deaths of her brothers and sister” (Shelley 55).

The resulting internalized self-loathing that permeates the consciousness of abused, neglected children shows through the words of Justine and the Creature with equal intensity, merging their reflections into one, “I almost began to think that I was the *monster*,” Justine confesses during her trial (Shelley 72). Similarly, the Creature, upon comparing his reflection to the “perfect forms” of the cottagers, utters, “when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the *monster* that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations” (Shelley 88). This example conveys that the monstrosity does not reflect the inner self; instead, it is a distorted image received from the outside. Neither Justine nor the Creature is inherently “monstrous.” It is the lack of social support, understanding, and empathy that makes them feel appalling changes within themselves. In reality, the people around them become monsters, unable to empathize with those whose struggles are different from their own.

This essay draws parallels between Elizabeth, Safie, Justine, and the Creature. All of them feel alienated from the world in one way or another due to social injustice and discrimination. Elizabeth's monstrous presence in Frankenstein's nightmare not only foreshadows her dark fate but also likens her to the Creature Victor is about to leave behind. Both the monster and Frankenstein's bride remain neglected by him, left to themselves in the harsh, unforgiving circumstances. Safie, a foreign girl, unknowingly becomes the Creature's pathway to education which both of them were denied due to their "un-male" and "inhuman" selves, respectively. Finally, poor Justine fighting for her freedom in court is a mirror of the Creature's desire to convince Victor of his inherent innocence—the monstrosity reflects from the outside world. Therefore, Frankenstein's monster embodies all the anger, rage, and despair felt by women whose desires have been suppressed by patriarchal society for a long time, "if I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear" (Shelley 111). However, for Mary Shelley, this parallelism was not merely the question of women's rights. Her lurid Creature symbolizes the writing craft itself: gathering numerous reflections from the world and forming them into a seemingly terrifying yet profoundly amiable, evocative whole. This gift of creating a masterpiece from fragments and tying them together with an invisible thread that pierces through its most overlooked characters makes Mary Shelley not only a brilliant writer but also a merciful Creator of the world where women (albeit in disguise of a repellent being) are allowed to break free from the stifling grasp of the monstrous world. After all, despite the diverse appearances, every single one of us is just a monster in the looking glass.

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