ESSAI

Volume 5 Article 12

1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation
Cibich, Angela (2007) "All Roads Lead to Rousseau," *ESSAI*: Vol. 5, Article 12.
Available at: http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol5/iss1/12

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All Roads Lead to Rousseau

by Angela Cibich

(Honors English 1102)

Since its publication in 1818, *Frankenstein* has enchanted readers worldwide. Its romantic style, complex characters, and clever social and political undertones have also made it a staple in English curriculums throughout the United States. Mary Shelley managed to create not only a genre defining novel, but to artificially incorporate all the social, political and literary influences that led to its creation. The novel began as an entry in a ghost story contest, while she was in the company of Percy Bysshe Shelley (her poet husband), Lord Byron, and John William Polidori. At the time, Mary Shelley was also reading John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Fantasmagoria*, which when combined with the artistically charged atmosphere and her extensive knowledge of mythology and literature produced *Frankenstein*.

The novel gains its subtitle, 'The Modern Prometheus,' and much of its main character, from the Greek myth of the Titan Prometheus. Mary Shelley alludes to the Titan through the character of Victor Frankenstein, who like the former, went against the laws of nature and the will of the gods. However, while many contemporaries viewed Prometheus as an enlightening savior, Mary Shelley saw him as a villain who brought violent and bloody habits to fundamentally good human beings. Mary Shelley finishes off her allusion of Victor as Prometheus when he receives his punishment not through the gods, but through his own creation, the unnamed creature.

The novel also owes quite a bit to *Paradise Lost*, sharing similar characters and purpose. In *Mary Shelley's Monster*, Martin Tropp observes that both novels are "designed to define man's place in the universe and give form to those forces threatening to displace him" (69). And that force, Frankenstein's Monster, is a trio of Miltonic reflections. The Creature's most obvious comparison lies in Milton's Satan. Both were created to be beautiful in their own respect, fell from grace, and never took action against their creator. However, Satan falls with companions, while the Creature falls alone and "Satan knows he is a devil, condemned to Hell forever, while the Monster still believes it can find a place in the world of man and nature" (Tropp 74). It is because of the Creature's yearning for companionship that it then takes on the form of Milton's Adam. Like Adam, the Creature is alone in the world, the only one of its kind, and implores its creator for a counterpart. The main difference between the Creature and Adam is that Adam is loved by his creator while the former is not. Adam's request is lovingly fulfilled, while Frankenstein maliciously destroys the Creature's Eve and condemns it to its own exile without the comfort of a companion. The Creature can also be loosely compared to Milton's Eve in the scene where it is moving through the forest and catches sight of itself in a puddle. Like Eve, the Creature is given a revelation upon the first glance of its face, but unlike Eve, who discovers her beauty, the Creature is shown the true horror of its countenance and understands it can never fit into the world of men.

However, the Creature is also a compilation of other influences. Mary Shelley draws bits of its character from classical epic poetry like *Beowulf* and different mythology traditions that featured humanoid monsters. John Gardner's book *Grendel* takes the Miltonic route and examines the psychology of the infamous monster Grendel and one could argue that the novel follows Mary Shelley's tradition of painting a fair and ambiguous portrait of something that would generally be brushed off as a run of the mill villain. Along with all of this, Shelley was also working against a very rich literary backdrop. She was able to draw from a rich tapestry of stories of wild men that were popular in medieval art and legend and the emerging literature regarding doppelgangers and repressed selves like Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

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The Creature is perhaps the most mesmerizing aspect and possibly the key to the book's success. It has sparked essays, lectures, and debates as to its true nature and the question of whether it is a monster or victim. In order to label the Creature correctly, one must explore the Creature's nature and the meanings of the terms 'monster' and 'victim' as well as their implications. It is only through the examination of the Creature's origins, actions, and environment that one can understand how the Creature was victimized and reacts by *becoming* a monster through its own actions. In doing so, it makes itself a being to be feared *and* pitied.

What exactly *is* a monster? Webster's *New World Dictionary* defines it as "any grotesque imaginary creature, a very wicked person, or any huge animal or thing" (382). Through the ages monsters have been represented in various ways, mostly as representative symbols, which differ from the narrow dictionary definition. In literature, monsters have represented the unknown, the wondrous, and the sublime. However, they have also been used to illustrate evil, arrogance, and other immoral pursuits and to serve as a warning about the dangers of science and man's Byronic over-reaching. In religious traditions, monsters were generally seen as representations of evil while in earlier Greek and Norse mythology, monsters were the enemies of the gods. This view carried from its pagan origins into Judaism and Christianity as well as eastern religions. Church officials from Jewish Pharisees to Christian bishops like Augustine of Hippo held that those who possessed monstrous features or were deformed were demonstrations of God's wrath against sinners. Because, as Chris Baldick states in "The Politics of Monstrosity," "In a world created by a reasonable God, the freak or lunatic must have a purpose: to reveal visibly the results of vice, folly, and unreason, as a warning to erring humanity" (48). And in what became the Roman Catholic and later Protestant divisions of Christianity, the image of the monster and the motif of the monstrous were retained in order to represent Satan and his army of devils. Centuries later, when Enlightenment thinking began to revamp the institutions and values around it, the idea of the monster presented itself as a victim of the society around it. Thus, the monster became a being which all humanity was responsible for. This new approach helped Enlightenment thinkers force individuals to understand their own monstrosity and the causes of it. Meanwhile, the victim became a very popular figure in literature, representing the downtrodden, Christ icon, or righteous suffering martyr.

Shelley's Creature fits both of these descriptions and seems to follow in both traditions. It performs wicked acts against its creator and humanity, much like Satan and other monsters of lore. It directly murders three innocent people (William, Clerval, and Elizabeth), frames the servant Justine, thereby sentencing her to death, and harasses Victor Frankenstein until he too dies. It is unnatural in appearance, and much like mythological monsters, it is comprised of several different parts. Many monsters, like the griffin (a lion with the head and wings of an eagle) are an abnormal assembly of normal features juxtaposed to inspire horror. The Creature also fulfills the other religious and literary requirements of a monster by serving as a warning to the hubris of Byronic characters like Victor and Walton. On the other hand, the Creature does posses a few qualities that seem to contradict his 'monstrosity.' To illustrate, it is incredibly eloquent and intelligent and presents itself as having a genuine desire for love, compassion, and companionship. For many critics, the Creature's literacy is the key to unlocking its true character and presenting it as a victim. The Creature then begins to be seen as victimized by humanity, spurned by its creator and treated with abhorrence at every turn. Some critics, like Joyce Carol Oates, have gone so far as to make an allusion to Christ when describing the Creature. Oates states that the Creature is "sinned against by all humankind, yet fundamentally blameless, and yet quite willing to die as a sacrifice" (544). Though the Christ claim is rather subjective, the Monster may be verified as the actual victim of at least three institutions.

During the late eighteenth century and well into the early nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution was taking place in England. With the tense atmosphere of change whirling around the country, Mary Shelley seems to have written *Frankenstein* as a warning to the overly ambitious goals of technology and progress. Mary Shelley's distrust of the purpose and effects of science are quite

clearly presented and set a precedent for other works of cautionary science fiction like H.G. Well's *Island of Dr. Moreau* and *The Invisible Man* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In fact, the novel can still be seen as relevant in today's modern scientific community, as an argument against genetic engineering by its assertion that if man plays God he will create beings that have no place in society and have the potential to either usurp or destroy humanity's role in the world. The end result becomes an android, a being that is not, and can never be, human, but is endowed with human characteristics and emotions. Technology creates these androids and they end up doomed to isolation. And because the Creature is so haphazardly created and abandoned, science (represented by Frankenstein) must have a share in the responsibility for the Creature and the crimes it commits.

But Frankenstein does not merely symbolize technology; he stands for a defined political role as well. In many ways, Mary Shelley uses Frankenstein and his Creature to project her renunciation of her parents' revolutionary attitudes and the support of calm, reasonable republicanism. Her own political views are best illustrated within the dialogue between Victor and the Creature. Berthold Schoene-Harwood observes that their conversation on the ice in Book II really becomes a political clash as "Victor speaks in his typically subjective and self-reflexive manner," while "the Monster retains much more of the Enlightenment political style. He talks analytically about the social influences that have shaped his life" (142). Therefore, the novel presents Mary Shelley's own question (one that would be echoed by her contemporaries, modern critics and philosophers) of whether a monster is born or made. Thus, the Creature takes on the role of the poor and oppressed. But the position of politics in the novel remains slightly ambiguous, giving the Creature the appearance of the traditional 'Jacobin' monster filled with radical ideals and yet possessing the ability to speak like a philosopher while a conservative looking Victor rages on with romantic emotions much as a Godwinian theorist would do.

Lastly, the Creature emerges the most as a victim of society. The Creature begins his sad tale to Frankenstein by saying, "I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity: but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow-creatures, who owe me nothing? They spurn and hate me" (66). Mary Shelley again asks whether monstrosity is inherent or learned. It is often said that the Creature is made into a monster by society. Every attempt it makes at entering society is met with fear and violence. First, its creator abandons him and then the townspeople chase him into the woods. Later, the De Lacy family it has been unwittingly instructed by and has grown to love expel it from cottage and call it a monster. And its last attempt at 'goodness,' when it saves the rustic's daughter from drowning, leaves it with a musket ball in its leg. The Creature learns the hard way that humanity is imperfect and judgmental, but it fails to realize that it is difficult to look past a monstrous appearance when, for centuries, the conception of monsters as emblems of evil have been ingrained into the culture and collective subconscious. However, many of the novel's critics, including Mary Shelley's husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, contended that its treatment and preordained conception as a "monster" made it the victim and *forced* it to become evil. In his essay "On Frankenstein," Shelley states, "Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked. Requite affection with scorn - let one being be selected, for whatever cause, as the refuse of his kind- divide him, a social being, from society, and you impose upon him the irresistible obligations- malevolence and selfishness" (186).

All these illustrations of monstrosity and victimization seem to set the stage for Rousseau's principals. The Creature is first badly mistreated, then put into the idyllic state of lawless nature where it becomes a 'noble savage.' But nature is not enough for the Creature; it has human desires for food, shelter and company and it quickly returns to society. And by re-entering, the Creature is unwittingly pulled into Rousseau's idea of 'social contract.' Rousseau defines social contract as an implicit agreement between society and its individuals and institutions to strive together for the common good. Any violation of this agreement would return society to a violent and anarchic state of nature. And since "Rights come from agreeing to the contract, those who simply choose not to fulfill

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their contractual obligations, such as by committing crimes, risk losing some of their rights, and the rest of society can be expected to protect itself against the actions of such outlaws. To be a member of society is to accept responsibility for following its rules, along with the threat of punishment for violating them" (Wikipedia).

Therefore, because the Creature is given a life and a humanoid form it is already a part of society. And by continuously initiating human contract, the Creature is taking as active role in social contract and exercising its rights. Its literacy, seen as a testament to its victimization, also serves to 'trap' the Creature in the contract as well. In "What is a Monster," Peter Brooks states that "As a verbal creation, he is the very opposite of the monstrous: he is a sympathetic and persuasive participant in Western culture" (199). The Creature continues to exclaim that it is not truly human and was manufactured so it can reciprocate isolation with killing while remaining blameless. But despite the level of its 'humanness,' it still has free will like every other living animal on Earth. And when it begins to violate the rights of others through murder, it breaks the contract and gives society the right to punish and spurn it. So regardless of the Creature's sad circumstances, it *chooses* to murder and commit wicked acts. Frankenstein does not take the Creature's hands and place them around his brother's neck and the De Lacy family does not force the Creature to stalk and harass his creator.

It is because of free will that Oates' Christ reference is thrown out the window; there is nothing Christ-like in the murder of four innocent people. The Creature is not blameless and does not sacrifice itself in any way. It is essentially serving the death penalty, which would mostly likely be inflicted upon it were it standing trial. The Creature is also the furthest thing from an innocent martyr. It is an intelligent and calculating killer, making expressive and persuasive arguments in the same manner that a sociopath would. And while it makes these declarations of inherent goodness and the right to exist and have a companion, it goes around killing and terrorizes the only man that can bring it any sort of satisfaction. The fact that it threatens Frankenstein repeatedly and uses the lives of his family and friends as bargaining tools speaks volumes about its callous and selfish nature. Moreover, the Creature goes on to assume that it is *entitled* to companionship and love. This erroneous assumption and the behavior that stems from it are a lot like that of a child learning to face the harsh reality of society on the playground; reacting with surprise and indignation when the other children will not play with them. The Creature also acts childish and avoidant as it continually shifts blame for its actions and blatantly refuses to take any sort of responsibility for its actions. In fact, the Creature does not admit until the very end of the novel that it feels any guilt about its murderous rampage. And even its admission and demonstration of remorse can be called into question if only for the fact that the feelings emerge only when Frankenstein is dead and it has no one left to torment. Walton expresses it best by saying, "It is not pity that you feel; you lament only because the victim of your malignity is withdrawn from your power" (154). For even Walton is at first taken in by the Creature's eloquence and convenient display of affection and misery; but when he thinks back to Frankenstein and sees the Creature leering over his corpse, he understands its true nature.

Perhaps the question of the Creature's monstrosity will never be completely resolved. Debates will continue with each side crying 'monster' or 'victim' and asking whether the Creature should be pitied or feared. It is difficult to come to a clear conclusion when even Mary Shelley seems to have wanted readers to sympathize with Frankenstein's monster. She creates it as a subject nearly every reader can relate to- an abandoned child, an orphan, and a deformed, loveless and isolated version of every individual. But no pain or suffering inflicted upon it gives it, or any human being, the right to take life. Pity the horrid circumstances of the Creature's birth, do not pity the Creature. One may pity the physically and sexually abusive childhood of a violent rapist or murderer, but one does not excuse the actions they take. They are charged and sentenced as the heinous criminals that they are for committing such morally depraved acts and in effect, breaking Rousseau's social contract. It is the ability to rise above environment and upbringing to embrace free will and

responsibility that allows humanity to boast of its accomplishments. And it is via the fact that Mary Shelley gives the Creature free choice, and depicts examples of it using this gift, that she appears to affirm her support of Rousseau's philosophy and the social responsibility each and every human being carries. Victor and perhaps all humanity have blood on their hands, but putting the pistol in a hand is not the same as firing it. Therefore, because the Creature *chose* to act monstrously in response to its environment it ceased to be a creature and became a despicable and iniquitous monster, deserving of every ounce of hatred and fear humanity could bestow on it.

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