

An Analysis of the Theme of Alienation in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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Introduction

A novel that seeks to answer questions that have confused both the author, Mary Shelley, and the readers of her time is, *Frankenstein* published in 1818. *Frankenstein* is mostly famous for the richness of ideas it asks mankind to confront, how knowledge could be used for good and evil purposes, how uneducated and deprived people were treated and how the influence of technology affected mankind. Critics were at first negative towards the first edition which was issued anonymously, mostly because they were confused by the speculation as to the identity of the author. Reviewers thought *Frankenstein* was horrible and disgusting but despite the reviews, it was a success almost immediately. The second edition of *Frankenstein* was published in 1823, and this time Mary Shelley was credited as the author.¹

The novel is about Victor Frankenstein a young, brilliant scientist, who is obsessed with finding the secret of giving life. He works alone in his laboratory and he creates a living being out of the organs of dead men. The monstrous creation is at first gentle and sensitive but because of mankind's fear of its appearance, the monster is forced to hide away from society. The monster's anger and frustration towards mankind leads it to seek revenge on its creator which results in the killings of Victor's little brother, Victor's best friend and his wife. The monster takes its refuge at the North Pole where Victor pursues the monster in order to kill his creation once and for all. Instead Victor is fatally wounded by the monster and the story ends with the monster accusing mankind of lacking compassion before it vanishes into the Arctic sea with an ice raft.

Mary Shelley's novel is above all about the theme of alienation and the innocent victims that are affected by it. The author presents an exceptional character in Victor Frankenstein and his creation, the monster. They are like two halves of a character that cannot live without the other. In the end, this also leads to their ruin. The aim of this essay is to analyse the theme of

¹ [Http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frankenstein#Genesis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frankenstein#Genesis)

1.1 The gothic novel

There has always been a fascination with the dark and the unknown, and horror stories have throughout time always intrigued people and have existed as long as there have been oral and written literature. The term 'gothic' is used in many different fields; dark medieval architectural references, literature and also music and art. As Anneli Carlson mentions in *Female Gothic*, the literary term 'gothic' is often applied to a collection of novels written from the mid-18th century to around 1820, and refers to dark horrific terrors such as bloodsucking vampires and unexplainable events:" historically speaking the gothic novel was a general movement away from the classical order in eighteen century towards a more imaginative aspect which at many points came in contact with the Romantic movement"².

After the period of Enlightenment swept through the western nations, it was possible to be both atheist and be considered reasonable. In former days people could still believe in witches and sorcery but the Enlightenment mostly brought an end to this form of superstition. Ghosts were now in fashion and people liked to be amused with stories about the unknown. The first gothic novel is considered to be *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, which was published in 1764. "Horace Walpole set the seal upon a new usage in English with his famous description of *The Castle of Otranto* as a (gothick) story in 1764."³ Gothic fiction was, for example, subsequently developed by a number of famous writers, such as Ann Radcliffe with *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Matthew Lewis with *The Monk*. These authors later laid the foundation of what many people later came to refer to as 'Gothic'. When *Frankenstein* was published in 1818, its supernatural and romantic elements further broadened the literary term. Characteristics of the gothic novel often contain for example; large castles, ghosts, a young innocent girl murdered, and supernatural elements. Nature plays an important role with high mountains, storms, thunder, and forests. The scenery and the fantastical elements lead the

² Anneli Carlson, *Female Gothic. A study of The Works Wuthering Heights, The Mysteries of Udolpho and Frankenstein* (Luleå: luleå U of T, 1998) 4

³ David Punter, ed. *A Companion to the Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000) 15

issues of the real world.⁶ Romance writers are concerned with nature, compassion of mankind, human feelings, freedom of the individual and rebellion against society. One romantic characteristic of *Frankenstein* is the monster, which symbolizes social rejection and is subsequently chased away because of its appearance and consequently rebels against society. *Frankenstein* also discusses many challenging questions regarding mankind and society.

1.3 The life of Mary Shelley and the genesis of *Frankenstein*

In the intro of 1831, the author answers the frequently asked question of “how I, then a young girl, came to think of and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea?”⁷ by referring to her parents as being distinguished literary celebrities and that she was, early in life, introduced to writing. Mary Shelley was born on August 30, 1797 in London, daughter to William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, both referred to as ‘radicals’. According to Johanna M. Smith: “both her parents were prominent in revolutionary movements that peaked in the late eighteenth century”⁸ England had moved from a primarily agricultural to an increasingly industrial economy and Mary Shelley lived during a time of chaotic change and these changes can be traced in her view of politics and ideologies of gender.⁹ Her life was surrounded with tragic events; her mother’s death only four weeks after giving birth, the deaths of her own three children, and the accidental death of her husband. Mary was 16 years old when she met her husband to be, Percy Bysshe Shelley in London. Since Percy was already married, Mary eloped with him to continental Europe several times. Only after Percy’s wife committed suicide could the couple get married. In the summer of 1816, Mary and Percy visited Geneva in Switzerland; they became neighbours to Lord Byron, another writer.¹⁰ The group of Mary, Percy, Byron and Byron’s friend Polidori spent their time together and because of the constant

⁶ Maurice Hindle, *Frankenstein* (1994; London: Penguin Books Ltd) 4

⁷ Shelley, 5

⁸ Johanna M. Smith, ed. *Frankenstein. Mary Shelley* (New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1992) 4

⁹ Johanna M. Smith, *Mary Shelley Revisited* (New York: Twayne publishers, 1996) 15

¹⁰ Johanna M. Smith, *Mary Shelley Revisited. Chronology*

2.1 The theme of alienation in the character of Victor Frankenstein

Alienation is something Victor experiences his entire life in terms of his childhood and family, scientific work, and society. The character of Victor Frankenstein in Shelley's novel is a man of science and his goal in life is to follow his dream of understanding the miracles of the world. He spends almost his entire time recreating life in the form of a monster. However, he is not aware of the consequences. In the end Victor spends his remaining time in life trying to destroy the same creation he tried so hard to create. During his period at the university where he makes the experiments, Viktor isolates himself from society, and all his time and effort is devoted to the desire of knowledge.

At first he lives with his parents as an only child in a 'perfect' family. Over time he adopts a fascination for science and eagerly begins to educate himself. "I was, to a great degree, self taught with regard to my favourite studies. My father was not scientific, and I was left to struggle with a child's blindness, added to a student's thirst for knowledge."¹² Victor leaves his family in his younger years for studies in a different town and this does not seem to have any effect on him at all. He does not have any contact with his family, not even by letter. Any contact with his family takes place on his conditions. Victor's total attention goes to his scientific studies in Ingolstadt. He does not have many friends, and is not tempting to find any. Instead he locks himself up in his room studying, and is not bothered about being alone. The reader can understand from the novel that Victor has himself chosen this isolation from people. No one has forced him to a life in solitude. The only true friend he has is Clerval, and this friendship is also based on Victor's terms, but still he does not confide to Clerval about his troubles with the experiment.

Victor chooses to set up his laboratory "in a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house"¹³ in Ingolstadt as a replacement for the school's laboratory. It is a self imposed

¹² Shelley, 38

¹³ Shelley, 52

its hideous appearance. Actually, all the creature wants is to be loved, but after many attempts to fit into society, it realises that it will never be accepted by humans. The first experience with the world is when the creature opens its eyes, and sees Victor's scared look. Victor immediately flees. The creature's own 'father' rejects it even though he has made it; "unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room and continued a long time traversing my bedchamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep."¹⁶ The creature is left all alone with no information about where it is, who it is, and is like a new born child left alone in the enormous world.

The second experience the creature has with humans is by contact with the villagers, where they throw stones at it to make it leave them." I had hardly placed my foot within the door before the children shrieked, and one of the women fainted. The whole village was roused; some fled, some attacked me."¹⁷ People are appalled and frightened of the creature and attempt to drive the creature away.

The rejection of the Dclacey family is the creature's third experience with humans. This is the first family that it comes in contact with, and also wants to be a part of. Because of its previous experience with humans the creature decides to hide, and secretly observe the family. The creature finds out "that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds."¹⁸ The creature believes that the language is "a godlike science"¹⁹ which will help it to be accepted and it learns the language by observing the Dclacey family. It also believes that if it could only tell the blind father its story, it would be accepted by their family. But it gets interrupted by the children when they enter the house, and in fear for their father's life they react by forcing the creature away with violence: "Felix darted forward, and with supernatural force tore me from his father, to whose

¹⁶ Shelley, 55

¹⁷ Shelley, 101

¹⁸ Shelley, 107

¹⁹ Shelley, 108

am malicious because I am miserable. Am I not shunned and hated by all mankind?"²⁴ It simply responds in the same way the humans have towards it, with violence. It is such devastating experiences that ultimately turn it into a murderer. The monster is innocent in the sense that it has not chosen alienation itself, this is also the reason why other innocent people are killed. Victor's younger brother William, an innocent boy, is killed, and their maid Justine, who by her name can be interpreted as justice, is falsely accused and later on also convicted of being William's murderer. Elizabeth explains the reason for Justine's destiny as "men appear to me as monsters thirsting for each other's blood."²⁵ Instead of the monster, mankind is now starting to be like monsters. Victor's friend Clerval and Elizabeth are also killed by the monster. Because of society's treatment of the innocent monster, people within the society are rewarded with the same coin.²⁶ In fact all the creature really wants is to escape alienation, and to have a wife to love and to be loved by.

As a last resort the creature demands that Victor create a female spouse to it for companionship. At first Victor considers it because of the creature's speech, and promises to create a woman for the creature. However, he regrets his promise and tears the female creation apart before it is finished. This leads to the creature retaliating by killing Elizabeth, Victor's wife to be by actions that are mostly based on revenge. The creature Victor has created becomes a monster because of its observations, and experiences of mankind. From the beginning it is a *tabula rasa* and is neither evil nor spiteful; it gets beaten and driven off because of its appearance. It is society and mankind that shapes the creature into a savage.

2.3 The theme of alienation in the character of Robert Walton

Robert Walton can be considered as the most important person in the novel. Shelley has given Walton a well integrated personality and compared with Victor and the creature, he represents

²⁴ Shelley, 140

²⁵ Shelley, 88

²⁶ Ronny Ambjörnsson, *Mansmyter, James Bond, Don Juan, Tarzan och andra grabbar* (Stockholm, Ordfront förlag, 1999) 118

3. Meeting places

Mary Shelley uses a variety of meeting places as a method of illustrating the characters' alienation throughout the novel. The home of Frankenstein could be seen as one meeting place. The family is portrayed as the ideal family, as they live in peace and harmony. The links to alienation in the home of Frankenstein revolve around how Victor chooses to leave his family, and Caroline's undertaking to help the disadvantaged in society.

Victor's mother, Caroline, comes from poor family conditions; her father seeks solitude because of some mistakes he has made as a merchant. The two are now forced into poverty, and loneliness plays a great part of their lives. Shortly, Caroline becomes the nursing angel that takes care of her ill father: "his daughter attended him with the greatest tenderness"³⁰ but after ten months he dies. Victor's father, who is a friend of Caroline's father, comes "like a protecting spirit to the poor girl"³¹ and two years after her father's death he marries Caroline. As a result, Caroline wants to help the poor and deprived that are marginalised from society, because of the reason that she had been there herself.

In fact, the Frankenstein family can be interpreted as representing the sanctuary of heaven. Affection and charity are features that are important for the family members. The character of Elizabeth is introduced as a symbol of an angel that has come to the family:

She appeared of a different stock. The four others were dark-eyed, hardy little vagrants; this child was thin and very fair. Her hair was the brightest living gold, and despite the poverty of her clothing, seemed to set a crown of distinction on her head /.../ the moulding of her face so expressive of sensibility and sweetness

³⁰ Shelley, 31

³¹ Shelley, 31

out of dead body parts. Victor can be seen as God in a symbolic sense, the creator of human life.

The creature is born in Victor's laboratory, and from the moment it opens its eyes, it is rejected and left in isolation. "I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept."³⁵ Not even Victor, who has dedicated so much time to creating the monster, can force himself to stay and take care of it. This is the first of several rejections that the creature constantly encounters. Victor is terrified of being identified as the monster's originator and after his dream has been fulfilled, Victor becomes melancholy. Instead of rejoicing in his success, he isolates himself even more.

Shelley's novel begins with letters that Walton writes to his sister. These letters can be seen as a meeting place where Walton tells her about his isolation and loneliness. He has not got anyone to share his joy and misery with on the ship:" But I have one want which I have never yet been able to satisfy; and the absence of the object of which I now feel as a most severe evil. I have no friend, Margaret: when I am glowing with the enthusiasm of success, there will be none to participate in my joy"³⁶.

The ship is another meeting place. It is totally cut-off from civilisation on its path to remote places. Secondly, Walton feels alone, the crew on the ship cannot satisfy his wishes of companionship mainly because he is the leader and they are subordinate. Walton is isolated since he feels that he cannot participate in the crew's activities. Neither do they share the same dream that Walton desires to accomplish, nor do they fulfil his wishes of how this friend should be. "I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me, whose eyes would reply to mine."³⁷ Maurice Hindle also points out that Walton "is also gloomily certain that the

³⁵ Shelley, 98

³⁶ Shelley, 17

³⁷ Shelley, 17

4. Borderlines

The main theme of alienation can also be linked to the borderlines which exist in the novel.

Frankenstein's laboratory can be viewed as a border against the external world. This becomes clear since it is only Victor who has access to it, and he spends all his time there. People in his surroundings are completely unaware of what he is about to create, in his desire for glory.

Another border which is connected to alienation is the shed, where the monster decides to hide. "here, then, I retreated and lay down happy to have found a shelter, however miserable, from the inclemency of the season, and still more from the barbarity of man."⁴¹ The shed is located at the DeLacey's farm, and when protected by the shed's walls, the monster observes the family members. Due to its observation it also learns how human society functions. Even though the creature feels close to the people on the farm, it is not able to openly show itself to the others. At least not until it is capable of communicating with them. Only when the night comes with its covering darkness, is the creature able to move quite freely.

The night can also represent a border which separates the monster from society. In the night's safety the monster can for example, help the DeLacey family with some daily chores, or find some food to eat. "During the morning I attended the motions of the cottagers, and when they were dispersed in various occupations, I slept; the remainder of the day was spent in observing my friends. When they had retired to rest, if there was any moon or the night was star-light, I went into the woods and collected my own food and fuel for the cottage"⁴² Despite the monster's freedom to move, it is still exposed to alienation and loneliness. There are no other human beings who are alive during the night. The night is left for outcasts and other living beings that are searching for shelter. One can say that the monster more or less lives in a non-man's-land where it has no contact with the people in its surroundings. The monster has acknowledged that people either get afraid of it and flee, or decide to attack it.

⁴¹ Shelley, 102

⁴² Shelley, 110

One additional borderline that supports the novel's main theme is when Frankenstein decides to hunt and kill the monster which occurs on the ices of the North Pole. The Arctic ice has two meanings. It can symbolize the rift which exists between Frankenstein and the monster. The creature seeks a father in Frankenstein meanwhile Victor does everything to forget the monster, and keep it as far away as possible. This gap and alienation means that the monster has from the day of its birth and to the end of the novel been left alone to meet the world. Frankenstein, on the other hand chooses one more time to be alone, and wishes nothing more than to get rid of his creation. The ice can also symbolize the border that exists between the ship and the world.

Maurice Hindle gives further examples of how the icy surroundings are connected with all the male protagonists' narrative; Walton's journey towards the North Pole, when Frankenstein tells his story when they are aboard the ship trapped in the solid Arctic ice, and when the creature tells its story to Victor at the mountain of Mount Blanc overlooking the sea of ice above Charmonix.⁴⁶ Hindle also declares that "having these stories told in such icy surroundings symbolically draws our attention to the conditions of social isolation"⁴⁷ The metaphor of ice demonstrates the cold, uninhabited, and unemotional element, where no human being can survive alone.

According to Maurice Hindle, Mary Shelley again and again uses images of cold and heat, ice and fire, dark and light in her text to symbolize ironically the destructive effects of Frankenstein's experiment to bring together the worlds of life and death.⁴⁸ Since the author uses images of antitheses such as heaven and hell, ice and fire, and dark and light throughout the novel, the borderlines become clearer and subsequently also easier to understand for the reader. Frankenstein's family represent heaven, and the monster represents hell. The monster is forced to live in the sheltering darkness; Victor is fascinated by the secrets of life, and the

⁴⁶ Hindle, 123

⁴⁷ Hindle, 124

⁴⁸ Hindle, 124

Conclusion

The theme of alienation is without a doubt one of the most important theme in *Frankenstein*. Alienation is the common denominator between the three main characters. Victor Frankenstein is perhaps the only character that more or less chooses alienation by himself because of his desire for knowledge. In the end Victor becomes the prisoner of his own creation. The monster, on the other hand, is from its 'birth' a *tabula rasa*, it is the experiences the monster encounters in life that reflect its actions. The monster is greeted with disgust and violence even though it comes with friendly intentions. Subsequently it is forced into alienation in order to survive, and becomes the savage that mankind believes it is. By giving the monster a voice, the reader can sympathize with the pain and suffering that is caused by humans. The third character, Robert Walton represents the healthy human being, and he also represents the balance between Victor and the monster. Walton has a bad and a good side which also can represent Victor's bad side and the monster's good side. Both these aspects represent the healthy human being. The characters in *Frankenstein* are all victims of alienation and loneliness. None of them have chosen by themselves to be in this situation, they are victims because of the actions of others and these actions have subsequently left them in the grip of isolation.

Mary Shelley presents society from the viewpoint of the weak and the poor via the monster. She points out to the reader how a human being comes to live alone without any sense of human connection, and in that sense lacks all attributes; money, possessions, and a good family name which are the ticket to acceptance. Shelley is really questioning what it means to be a human being. Nobody chooses by themselves to stand alone to meet the world's possibilities and setbacks.

The theme of alienation also follows a pattern that is repeated during the whole novel. The ship is an isolated vessel on its path to further isolated regions. Walton, who is the leader of

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