Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: Re-conceptualizing Disability

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In her journal article "What is Disability Studies," Simi Linton presents a description of disability studies, likening two hands—the right curled into a fist, representing all disabled people, and the left hand open to receive the fist, representing society: the 'abled.' Linton continues explaining that the general population, at least publicly, agrees that the open palm should receive the fist seamlessly; this would imply people with disabilities ought to fit in well with society. In reality however, a poor fit exists, and Linton claims that the field of disability studies seeks to understand "the way we conceptualize what causes the poor fit and our prescription for change to make for a better fit" (Linton 1). In conceptualizing disabled people within society, society has generally seceded to a binary decomposition: one is either disabled or not. Historically, the similitude composition has been employed for constructions such as gender, sexuality, and race. Although many constructions have been recently accepted to exist on a spectrum, the continuity of disability remains largely undefined and unresearched. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is considered to be one of the pioneering pieces of literature that explore disability studies. Frankenstein follows Victor Frankenstein, a mad scientist who creates a conscious 'monster,' hereby referred to as Frankenstein. Using a textual interpretation of *Frankenstein*, this paper aims to derive a meaningful definition of disability and explore the politics of recognition and its relation to Frankenstein's struggle and ultimate failure to humanize himself.

Given the unseemly disposition between Frankenstein's perceived disability and Frankenstein's physical prowess, the definition of disability seems to follow social constructs rather than a strictly biological condition. General definitions of disability follow that the

disabled are weaker than the rest of society, be it of the mind or body. While this definition is arguably valid in many situations, perceived weakness does not necessarily equivocate to actual impairment. In her piece “Somewhere a Mockingbird,” Deborah Kent recounts her own experience being blind and marrying a sighted man: “I will always believe that blindness is a neutral trait, neither to be prized nor shunned...My husband, my parents, and so many others who are central to my life cannot fully relinquish their negative assumptions...In those crushing moments I fear that I am not truly accepted after all” (Kent 62). Even within a body of objectively stark misfortunes, Kent feels as if her blindness is a neutral trait; however, her dearest loved ones cannot see past blindness’ perceived weakness. Kent’s definition of disability thus clearly differs from the reigning societal definition of disability. Furthermore, Kent’s experiences highlight an interesting detail in meaningfully defining disability: the relationship between the body and its power in society.

Whereas Kent’s blindness merely suggests a relationship between the body and its power in defining disability, Frankenstein's body proves that the perceived disability and the consequential ostracization he faced constitutes a fundamentally different understanding of disability. In his book “The Disability Studies Reader,” Lennard Davis understood disability as a “relation between the body and power” (Davis 4). In his other book, “Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body,” Davis contends that the body “is in fact a way of organizing through the realm of the senses the variations and modalities of physical existence as they are embodied into being through a larger social/political matrix” (Davis 14). Davis suggests that our bodies have a certain degree of power and hierarchy in society. Following Davis’ logic, defining disability—especially physical features outlying from koinophylic composites—reasonably must

account for the relationship between the body and its power, or lack thereof, in society rather than its functionality. Frankenstein's body, although outlying from the average human body features, is superior in terms of functionality. Throughout the novel, Frankenstein's body withstands extremities of his environment and violence. Frankenstein recounts that, "I was more agile than they and could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded theirs" (Shelley 103). Furthermore, Victor also marvels at Frankenstein's body: "I suddenly beheld the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing towards me with superhuman speed. He bounded over the crevices in the ice, among which I had walked with caution. His stature, also, as he approached, seemed to exceed that of man." (Shelley 84). Finally, focusing on some of Frankenstein's individual features, "skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; ...hair of a lustrous black, and flowing; teeth of a pearly whiteness…" (Shelley 54), one could conclude that Frankenstein was far from disabled. However, because of the power less abled bodies reigned over the "larger social/political matrix," Frankenstein was deemed and treated as unfortunate and disabled. Thus, rather than defining disability as weakness in comparison to society, Frankenstein illustrates that at least a portion of our understanding about disability should reasonably entail the relationship between the body and its perceived power in society.

Defining disability within *Frankenstein* not only plays an important role in understanding the politics of recognition within the novel, but also begins to answer Linton's question about the "prescription for change to make for a better fit" between the right and left hand. Politics of recognition deals with how individuals in a society feel individually recognized for their identity, and to what extent society plays a role in both the individual's identity and recognition. In her

dissertation "Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: Re-conceptualizing the 'Politics of Recognition,'" Amber Knight discusses two major demands in the politics of recognition: "the 'politics of universalism' asks us to recognize the universal dignity of all citizens, while the 'politics of difference' demands that we recognize the distinct, particular identities of individuals and groups. (Knight 3). In reading *Frankenstein*, we see both these demands at play following Frankenstein's attempt to fit into society whilst respecting the people around him and expecting others to do the same. Knight further argues that Frankenstein "attempts to 'un-monster' himself by demanding that the other characters in the novel recognize his self-identity as a 'kind and feeling friend' (F, 95)… I argue that the Creature fails to achieve a more human identity because he cannot single-handedly overcome the asymmetrical power relations that underlie the social construction of identity, and that are reinforced through the construction of his identity as monster" (Knight 6). Within the politics of recognition, the individual contributes to his own identity to receive whatever recognition their contribution warrants. After Frankenstein saves a little girl from drowning, "the girl's father, after frantically 'tearing' the rescued child from the creature's arms, first runs from him, then he 'aimed a gun . . . at my body and fired' (Shelley 121)" (Standish 40). The emphasis placed on aiming the gun at Frankenstein's body rather than 'at my heart' or 'at myself' further explains the lack of identity Frankenstein has despite his heroic actions. Thus, in reading *Frankenstein*, neither demands for universalism nor difference are recognized for Frankenstein, largely due to "asymmetrical power relations that underlie the social construction of identity."

Regarding Linton's hope for a better fit, Amber Knight says, "Recognition should be understood as a matter of procedural justice, wherein justice requires social arrangements that

permit all members of society to not only interact face-to-face with one another as peers in processes of social construction but also challenge discursive power structures through deconstruction and the resignification of social meaning" (Knight 7). "Procedural justice" should entail every individual to be satisfied with their demands for universalism and difference, through deconstruction and resignification. Part of deconstruction includes the work of this essay—finding a more meaningful definition of disability. In the "resignification of social meaning," writers like Deborah Kent play a significant role in how society ought to perceive disability by portraying their own views of their disabilities.

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