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Essay 1

Alienation and Social Difference: An Analysis through Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and James  
Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*

Alienation is a feeling that most people have probably experienced at least once in their lives. Maybe it was when they left everything and everyone they knew and moved to a brand new country. Maybe it was when they were shunned for having a certain gender identity or sexual orientation. Or maybe it was when their friends stopped talking to them for some unknown reason. The point is that the feeling of being alienated is one that everyone can relate to, and this is a feeling that is explored by both Mary Shelley in her novel *Frankenstein* and James Baldwin in his novel *Giovanni's Room*. These authors explore the feeling of alienation and the concept of social difference through the various characters present in their respective novels, and from reading these novels, one can gain a better understanding of what it means to be alienated.

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the most alienated character is very obviously the creature. As soon as he gains life, he is shunned by Victor and is left to survive on his own. This is the very first experience of being alienated that the creature experiences. As he continues to explore the world, he faces many more instances of alienation. The root cause of this is simply his appearance and massive height. Since he is made from the body parts of various corpses, he has this deathly aura to him. Victor describes him as having "yellow skin [that] scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath", and "a shriveled complexion." (Shelley 84). Victor

further elaborates and says that before he gave it life, the creature was ugly, but now that it has life, its ugliness cannot be put into words (Shelley 85). As soon as someone lays eyes on him, their first instinct is to be scared, and the creature is never able to get them out of that fear. Now, I would like to take a look at the sequence in which the creature “lives” alongside a family, and learns about the world through them. At this point, the creature has learned that his appearance is what scares people and alienates him, so he instead decides to observe the family without them seeing him. Over time, he learns to talk and read, and eventually, he decides to reveal himself to the family. Intelligently, he decides to reveal himself to the old man of the family first when the remaining members are not around since the old man is blind. Initially, the encounter is going great, and the old man treats him as a human being and is not scared, since he is unable to see the creature's physical form. However, the rest of the family soon returns, and are frightened by the creature, and the creature leaves of his own volition and is feeling more alone than ever. This sequence firmly demonstrates that the singular reason behind the creature’s alienation is his appearance and that people would be more accepting of him had he not looked so hideous, as evidenced by the old man. This experience causes the creature to find Victor and ask him to create a female creature so that he has company and is not lonely and alienated. Victor obliges, but changes his mind at the last moment, leading the creature to swear that he will get his revenge on Victor. The creature reasons that by giving him life and then abandoning him, Victor is the root cause of his present condition and alienation. The creature succeeds in his revenge and kills both Henry and Elizabeth, before finally killing Victor himself. However, after killing Victor, the creature expresses regret about all the evils that he has committed and is awaiting his demise. This is a tragic ending for the creature since he had viewed getting revenge against Victor as his sole purpose, and now that he has accomplished it, he has nothing else to live for.

The only reason that the creature was driven to exact revenge was because of the alienation that he faced, and so one can conclude that in the creature's case, alienation led to tragedy.

On the other hand, Victor also experiences feelings of alienation, but for completely different reasons. The main reason for Victor's feelings of alienation is himself. While he is working towards creating the creature, Victor is so passionate and invested in his studies that he isolates himself from the rest of the world. Victor recalls that "[his] cheek had grown pale with study, and [his] person had become emaciated with confinement." (Shelley 80). After he creates the monster, he is so appalled and guilt-ridden that he falls extremely sick with Henry as his only companion. Then, as he rejoins society and his family, he is still a shell of his former self and still carries the guilt of what he has done. This stark difference in who he used to be and who he is now alienates him from his family. Then, the creature slowly ends up killing those close to him, and Victor ends up truly alone with no family at all. At this point, Victor decides that his only purpose is to hunt the creature and get revenge. This is a very clear parallel to the creature's motivation and circumstance: both Victor and the creature are completely alienated and alone and are only driven by exacting revenge on each other. Victor then meets his demise at the hands of the creature, and thus his tragic life comes to an end. Through her novel *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley showcases 2 characters who each embody a form of alienation, one who is alienated by those around him, and one who alienates himself from those around him, and shows that alienation results in tragic ends for both characters.

The author James Baldwin also discusses the concepts of alienation and social difference in his novel *Giovanni's Room*. In this novel, the protagonist, David, is the one who experiences feelings of alienation. He feels this because there is no one in his life he can confide in. He has a fiance, Hella, but he is not sure whether he truly loves her or not. Even during sex with her, he

treats it as a job rather than an act of passion. He also has an acquaintance, Jacques, who David somewhat likes but also feels contempt for. David says that “the contempt I felt for him involved my self-contempt” (Baldwin 28), from which one can determine that David feels that he is worthless and that he is not completely sure of who he is. As the novel progresses, David encounters Giovanni, whom he is strangely attracted to. Their relationship blossoms and David realizes that he truly loves Giovanni. However, David is not willing to admit to himself and the world that he is a homosexual and thus is not ready to leave Hella to move in with Giovanni. This results in David alienating himself from the one person who he truly loves, because he is afraid of what society will think. He has been conditioned to think that manliness is to be with a woman, and since he does not want to differ from the societal norm of heterosexuality, he decides to leave Giovanni for Hella. However, Hella eventually finds out about David’s sexuality, and she leaves him. Meanwhile, Giovanni is sentenced to be hanged for a murder that he has committed. At this point, David is now truly alone. Reminiscing on his life, David thinks “[t]he journey to the grave is already begun, the journey to corruption is, always, already, half over.” (Baldwin 154). He had thought that his sexuality being different from the societal norm would make him lonely, and thus did not embrace it. However, it was this choice to not embrace his sexuality that left him alienated, with no one to call family. Baldwin shows through the character of David that if one is not able to embrace one’s true identity, one will never be able to live happily and will feel alienated from the rest of society. Like Shelley, Baldwin goes on and show how this alienation ends in tragedy.

In conclusion, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* discuss the causes and effects of alienation. Shelley, through the characters of Victor Frankenstein and the creature, explores both internal and external alienation, how each one

displays their respective form of alienation, and how it affects them. Similarly, Baldwin explores how the differences between social expectations and one's identity can lead to alienation through the character of David. Both authors establish how feelings of alienation can negatively affect an individual, and warn against it. Instead, I propose we should all strive to be supportive of one another and be proud of our own identities.