

Frankenstein's Creature As Both Object and Victim of the Uncanny

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Frankenstein's creature is a powerful being. He can survive in extremes of temperature, go long periods of time without food, and speak a language fluently merely by eavesdropping. Yet, through the course of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, he is greeted with horror by all those he meets. His treatment seems to put him in the realm of Freud's uncanny. The English word 'uncanny' is used in the translation of Freud's essay "The 'Uncanny'" as an approximation of the German word *unheimlich*, meaning literally 'unhomely.' The uncanny is both familiar and unfamiliar, both of the self and not. This definition and understanding of the uncanny will be expanded as this essay progresses. If the creature is a signifier of the uncanny to the people he meets, his signification rests in his physical form, not his consciousness. His uncanniness is something projected onto his person, a quality of his observers, not him. The gap between his self-perception, and the perception of others causes him acute pain. When talking to his creator he says that he is "miserable" because he is "shunned and hated by all mankind." (128) To understand *Frankenstein* we must understand the psychological effect that the creature has on the other characters, while keeping in mind that this effect operates independently of the creature's own interiority. To focus only on the creature's uncanny effect on the other characters in the book would be a form of chauvinism. To focus only on the creature's

interiority would limit our understanding both of the motivations of the human characters, and of the creature's own experiences. I intend to prove that the creature's body produces an uncanny effect independent of his interior state, and that the early trauma of Frankenstein's treatment of the creature's deformity informs many of his later actions. We can see the separation between the creature's interior state and the perceptions of his observers most clearly when he is first animated.

Frankenstein is first afraid of the creature because it straddles the border between life and death. When animated the creature gains the attributes of life (breath, motion, cognition etc.) while retaining the appearance of dead flesh. Prior to the act of animation Frankenstein finds the "lifeless thing" (60) aesthetically pleasing, saying that "His limbs were in proportion and I had selected his features as beautiful." (60) But when the creature come alive he says that "These luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes...his shriveled complexion and straight black lips." This horrid contrast does not exist when the creature is inanimate. The features themselves cannot come as a shock to Frankenstein. He knows that the creature has "dull yellow eyes" (60) and black lips. He put them there. The problem lies in the animation itself, which, while restoring motion to dead tissue, leaves the creature with the stigmata of death.

The horror frankenstein feels at this mixture of life and death is a species of the uncanny. Freud writes that the "uncanny" is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar. (1-2)" The

conjunction of these two concepts is illustrated by the shared usages of *heimlich* (homely) and *unheimlich* (unhomely). *Heimlich* can mean “Friendly, intimate, homelike; the enjoyment of quiet content, etc., arousing a sense of peaceful pleasure and security as in one within the four walls of his house.” (3) However, it can also indicate something that is “concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know about it, withheld from others” (3) This alternate meaning is associated with the compound word *unheimlich*, which indicates something eerie or horrifying, alternately something that should have remained hidden that has come to light. Freud combines these meanings in his analysis of the uncanny, stating that the “uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old—established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression.” (13) This repressed emotion or idea is kept secret from the conscious mind until an external object forces the repressed matter out of concealment, producing the sensation of the uncanny. For Frankenstein the creature’s mixed nature evokes his repressed fear of death. The creature’s *heimlich* qualities, his respiration, the “work of muscles and arteries” (60) beneath his skin are made *unheimlich* by their admixture with the qualities of death. The creature’s body is an oxymoron: a living *memento mori*. Though the creature elicits a feeling of uncanniness in Frankenstein when he is born, it is only in Frankenstein’s subsequent dream that we see this repressed material treated explicitly.

Freud writes that there are “few parts of our earliest experiences that have been so completely preserved under a thin disguise, as that of our relation to

death.” He writes that this is due to our early instinctual fears, and also the result of science’s limited understanding of death. By creating the creature, Frankenstein attempts to remedy his limited understanding of death, but his creation is a failure. As if taunting him, it refuses to give up the physical trappings of death, confronting him with his inability to overcome his own mortality. In his dream immediately following his animation of the creature, Frankenstein says that he “saw Elizabeth, [his adopted sister] in the bloom of health...delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death...and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms.” In Frankenstein’s dream, the boundaries between the living and the dead collapse, as they are collapsed within the creature’s person. The living Elizabeth becomes the imago of Frankenstein’s dead mother, and he relives both the horror of her death, and of his own impotence. But all this occurs inside Frankenstein, and its correspondence to the reality of what he is observing is tenuous at best. The creature experiences his animation very differently.

Frankenstein projects his fears onto the creature, but the creature experiences his animation like a newborn child, with a child’s vulnerabilities. Neither is the feeling of uncanniness reciprocal. As a newborn being, the creature is not at a stage of development where he is capable of experiencing the uncanny. He has no repressed content to experience. When the creature later tells Frankenstein the story of his life he says, that “It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original era of my being; all the events of that period appear

confused and indistinct.” (95) . The reader is not given an explicit account of the effect of this initial parental rejection on the creature’s psyche, and the creature himself does not venture an explanation. But human infants die or suffer from attachment problems if they are deprived of human contact. There is no reason to think that the creature is any different. He is ‘born’ into an adult body, with the skills to fend for itself, however ineffectively, but his mental development does not differ greatly from a human infant’s, except in the speed at which he learns. After he comes to life his first desire is the same as a human infant’s—the desire for contact. While his creator sleeps, the creature gets off his slab and searches for him, eventually bursting through the shutters of his window. The gap between the two character’s perceptions is clear when Frankenstein gives his account of these events: “I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created...his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. Once hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped.” The creature’s first attempt at contact with another living creature is rebuffed, and his creator flees from him, leaving him to fend for himself in the wilderness. While the creature himself does not claim that his abandonment at this early stage has any effect on him, his actions in the final portion of the book suggests that this first rejection leaves lasting psychological scars. It is telling that the creature, whose first experience is abandonment by his creator, engineers a situation where his creator will pursue him across the world. The effects of these early experiences on the creature’s psyche will be explored more fully later in the essay, but first it is helpful to examine his other, later interactions with humans.

The creature's first interactions with other humans after Frankenstein abandons him are described only briefly in the text. He first encounters a shepherd, who screams and runs away. He next enters a village, where he causes widespread fear and anger. He flees, after he is pelted with rocks. Interestingly, the creature does not describe experiencing psychic pain at either of these rejections. He says that he was afraid, but his fear is the fear of an animal who has been attacked. When next he sees a human being he says, "I remembered too well my treatment the night before, to trust myself in his power." (99) While he is canny of the threat that the man presents to him, he does not seem concerned with the larger implications of the man's rejection. He does not seem to associate himself with other human beings. He describes a young woman as a "creature," (99) as if to emphasize his separation from her at that moment. The creature's feelings in this section pose an interpretive problem. Why should the creature's first act as a living being be to seek out and touch his creator, if shortly afterwards he displays little emotional connection with human beings? The answer is provided when the creature watches an interaction between Agatha and De Lacey through a chink in a boarded-up window.

When De Lacey smiles with affection on his child the creature says that he feels "sensations of a peculiar and overpowering nature: they were a mixture of pain and pleasure, such as I had never before experienced." (100) His first rebuffed attempt at human contact occurs before he can form memories, but we can see its legacy in his unconscious when he feels both pain and pleasure at the sight of a healthy relationship between a child and its parent. His desire for an

emotional bond with other humans, repressed after his initial trauma, returns when De Lacey and Agatha perform a successful modeling of a parent-child relationship. After he learns language and becomes enculturated, he attempts to befriend the De Lacey family, starting with the blind eldest De Lacy. De Lacey cannot perceive the uncanny physical appearance of the creature, and the creature's voice does not seem to carry the same uncanny content. The creature, perhaps made anxious by his first successful interaction with another human being, bumbles the job and is beaten by Felix when he returns home. It is hard to know why the De Lacy family and the other people in the creature's early life abuse him. Because it is the creature who is giving an account of these events, we do not have access to the interiority of his abusers. The creature does not attempt to explain their actions. He gives only an account of their gestures and speech. We can suppose that the repressed content that the creature elicits is the same universal fear of death that is stirred in Frankenstein, made specific to their personalities. It is more fruitful to look at what we do have: an account of the creature's interior space.

The creature's experiences with human beings during and after his encounter with the De Laceys repeats the same pattern with small variations. The creature is essentially infantile before he finds shelter in the De Lacey's hovel and has not developed the organization and repression that . Afterwards, the creature's mental faculties seem equivalent to an adult human's. The early trauma of Frankenstein's abandonment and disgust is repeated each time he encounters another human being. This repressed material comes to the fore,

investing each rejection with an extra significance. The creature reacts to this repeated exposure with mounting rage which finds its target in William. The creature claims that he kills William in order to wound Frankenstein. This is true, but only partially so. When the creature grabs William he repeats the same gestures he performed in infancy, reaching out for comfort and contact. He says, “The child still struggled and loaded my with epithets which carried despair to my heart; I grasped his throat to silence him and in a moment he lay dead at my feet.”(127) When he is rebuffed, he reacts with rage not only towards the young child, but also towards the father imago which he has superimposed on William, his first gesture towards another human being now transmuted into an act of violence. The creature makes only one more attempt to break the established pattern of relations with his creator.

When the creature begs Frankenstein to make him a mate he is also attempting to dispel the trauma of his earliest rejection. He claims that he wants a mate for companionship, as the rest of humanity is turned against him. When Frankenstein refuses, the monster makes a speech that inadvertently reveals his additional motive. “Let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit! Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing.” (129) This statement is not sentimental verbiage. The creature undoubtedly does want a mate, but he also wants to be reconciled with his creator. He forces Frankenstein to reenact the scene of his birth. This time however, the creature Frankenstein creates will not be alone in the world. The creature stays very close to Frankenstein, observing his work. When Frankenstein has finished the work of generation, the creature

will step in and offer the female creature the comfort he himself never experienced. When Frankenstein frustrates the creature's desire and destroys the unborn female creature, the creature's rage is partially inspired by the repetition of his creator's rejection. After Frankenstein destroys the female creature, the creature follows him to his bedroom, reenacting his earliest gestures in a new contact. Conscious, perhaps of his infantile powerlessness in his earlier performance, his tone is grandiose as it is nowhere else in the text. He says, "Slave I have reasoned with you, but you have proven unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power...you are my creator, but I am your master; —obey!" (147) . The monster finds himself repeating his earliest gestures, reaching out for succor only to be rebuffed by Frankenstein. Reliving his primal trauma, the monster takes refuge in narcissistic grandiosity, which acts as a baffle or mask over his deeper emotions. He swears that he will be revenged on Frankenstein, say, "I may die, but first you, my tyrant and torment, shall curse the sun that gazes on your misery," but even in his torment of Frankenstein he still reenacts his primal trauma.

After Frankenstein's refusal to make a female creature, the creature claims that his goal is to torment Frankenstein, but his actions do not support his words. He kills first Clerval, then Elizabeth, driving Frankenstein to quit his family then to pursue him across the world. By the time Frankenstein has decided to pursue him, the creature has already struck on a satisfactory means of harming Frankenstein. Why then, does he not continue to kill Frankenstein's family members? He has already proven himself capable of avoiding capture, and as

painful as it is for Frankenstein to chase the creature, it is not hard to imagine that to watch the death of his remaining family members would be more painful still. Instead, he ceases as soon as Frankenstein begins to follow him. It is because his desire for Frankenstein to suffer is secondary to his desire for Frankenstein to seek him out. By provoking Frankenstein into a chase the monster can reverse the roles in his primal trauma. Frankenstein says that “sometimes he himself, [the creature] who feared that if I lost all trace of him I should despair and die, left some mark to guide me. As he pursues Frankenstein from slab to bedchamber, now Frankenstein pursues him. Though the creature’s earlier desire for reconciliation and love are now obscured, it is still possible to see a dark mirror of these emotions in his actions. Despairing of his creator’s love, the creature strives to show his power over him, as if to dispel the power of his early failed attachment.

Frankenstein and the other characters in the novel perceive the creature as uncanny; though he begins his life with the same wants and desires as any human infant, he eventually repetitively reenacts his earliest traumas. In closing, what do we, the readers, find uncanny in *Frankenstein*? If we identify with Frankenstein the creature is a monster and the question is easily answered. If we identify with the creature, then perhaps the uncanny lies in the other characters, not in their bodies but in their selves, in the performance of identical acts of cruelty independent of place, time, or personality. And what would be uncanny to the creature? Perhaps it would be a father, glimpsed through a window, turning away from an infant son, ignoring his outstretched arms.

Bibliography:

Shelley, Mary. "Frankenstein. Ed. Johanna M. Smith." (1992). (2nd ed.)

Freud, Sigmund. "The uncanny." (Dear Betsy, I can't find original link to the text I used. When I do, I'll update this. As a stopgap I'll email you the PDF)