

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: Language is a Cultural Aspect

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Abstract:

Language plays an important role in differentiating the man from other creatures. It makes a man 'rational being' which enables him to differentiate a friend and a fiend, good and an evil. In writing *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley draws on the philosophies of John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau. Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) argued that a child is a 'blank slate' that is formed only through experience. Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education* (1762) promotes the idea that a child's upbringing is responsible for his education. In this study the efforts will be made to highlight the character Creature of the novel which is struggling in attaining the place and space in natural beings. The character Creature is the creation of Frankenstein's knowledge which seemed to be dangerous for the society. In order to mingle or adjust with the social beings around, the character of the novel starts learning language. Creature's attainment of language is an endeavor to make himself more humane. Though the novel has the reminiscences of gothic pictorials but the author tried to commemorate the values of language which helps in exploring ones feelings, emotions, ideas and thoughts. The Creature tries to justify himself and he is quite eloquent and is able to speak and reason, yet not be accepted by humans and therefore denied the rights of man. The creature attempts to make up for his physical appearance and learn the ways of man. He watches the cottagers and acquires the ability to speak eloquently. But this attempt at humanization fails, as he is still excluded from the human community. The creature is able to evoke some compassion from Victor, but in the end Victor Frankenstein changes his mind. The people in the novel are completely unwilling to try to understand and accept the creature. It is human nature to reject those that look different from yourself. The creature's body does not allow him to be considered human, and he therefore is not afforded human rights. **Language is a cultural aspect**, and therefore the creature's acquisition of it does not afford him humanity. His nature remains the same, and his nature is not human.

Key Words: *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), *Emile, or On Education* (1762), Reminiscences, Pictorials, Cottagers, Humanization.

INTRODUCTION

The motive of writing *Frankenstein* or the Modern Prometheus was to produce the masterpiece of horror story. In the novel the Victor Frankenstein worked over deadly objects

around him in order to produce any object like human beings and toiled seriously in order to success in humanizing it. And he succeeds in his desire, which is portrayed in the lines of the novel.

It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet.

(Shelley 58)

But my focus in this study will be, can a language inquest person be regarded a full man? Or is it simply an aspect of culture to sustain? Victor worked hard to imbibe life in the object and he succeeded but haven't thought about the negative consequences. He is focused and eagerly anticipating his creation being given life.

Infusion of Life into an Inanimate

However, it is interesting to note Victor's choice of phrasing when he says he "might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at [his] feet". In this phrasing Victor is specifying his creation as something distinctly not human. Victor calls the Creation a "lifeless thing". A description such as this is extremely cold and could be describing anything from a table Victor has in his house to a piece of garbage. He does not even say it is a lifeless body, but merely a thing. To bring the creation to life, Victor will "infuse a spark of being". The word "being" is an abstract term, and not something that is specific to humans. Exactly what will be infused with the lifeless thing is not specified, and the result is a creation that does not belong to any specific category. The Creature's status as a being is ambiguous, and he is already being excluded by Victor in the sense that he is already referring to the Creature as something that is not human. Also interesting is that Victor notes that the creature is lying at his feet. The visual is of the creature being physically below Victor. This gives the impression of Victor being elevated above the creature, both literally and figuratively. The implication of this cold description is that Victor is something superior to the creature. At this moment, not only his status but also his body is superior. Victor is a human, and the creature is currently a "lifeless thing". Victor clearly does not recognize the Creature as a human, and in fact sees him as something inferior. The Creature is just a "thing", he is an object. Therefore, Victor does not see him as a being that could be part of the human community

"...by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs" (Shelley 58).

This is the exact moment where the creature is given life. The movements of the creature described here do not give the impression of how a human moves. Victor's initial perception of his creation is something whose movement is really quite odd. Victor sees "the dull yellow eye of the creature open". The Creature does not open his eyes, but is rather described as the eye simply opening. It is as if the eye is opening, but not being opened. Not only that but the eye that is revealed, instead of being white like a person's eye normally is, is a dull yellow. Overall this is quite an eerie image, and I feel it is not a description of a normal human movement. The Creature is moving as if it is a thing and not a living being.

After this Victor says that “it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs”. The limbs are not described as a voluntary movement on the creature’s part. It does not give the impression of someone moving their limbs. Instead, it is as if the limbs are objects being moved by something else. The words “convulsive” and “agitated” also imply jerky, unattractive movements. Again, the image is not that of how a human moves, and is overall unsettling. It is as if the Creature’s movements are involuntary. His body appears to be moving without the Creature deciding to do so, and later in the novel it is the Creature’s inability to control his passion and actions that cause him to commit murder. This apparently involuntary movement causes him to do things that will not allow him to be accepted into society. Also noteworthy is that here Victor is still referring to the Creature as “it”.

Language and Appearance as an Aspect of Culture

The Creature started moving and have imbibed the language but still turns out to be something humans cannot stand to look at.

How can I describe my emotions at the catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! -- Great god! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips. (Shelley 58)

Victor had originally imagined the Creature as beautiful. The initial concept was forming something beautiful and aesthetically pleasing to the human eye. Victor had been working on making the limbs proportional, and selecting features that were pleasing. He uses human bodies and bases the concept of the Creature of what humans would find appealing. Yet the result is terrifying. The Creature has flowing black hair **and good-looking teeth, and language** but all these features accomplish is an overall more horrifying effect. The beauty in those aspects only creates a more stark contrast with the hideousness of the creature. He is made from human parts and in human likeness, but is not seen as a human being. Even though he is meant to look human, it is as if there is something inherently inhuman about him. Only moments before this, Victor had no hesitation about giving this body life. If he had seen the body as this ugly previously, Victor would have gone through with the animation process. Victor doesn’t see his Creation as hideous until it’s too late, and this change in perspective happens in an instant. An explanation for this is that Victor was so wrapped up in his endeavor that he could not see what he was doing with reasonable judgment. He was so involved in his own fantasy that he could not see what he was creating. Shelley is implying that no matter what efforts Victor had gone to, the Creature would have been hideous. Victor puts a massive amount of effort into building this body, and his goal is that of beauty. It is only at the exact moment that the Creature has been given life that Victor becomes horrified. He immediately describes the Creature in ways that are negative. The lifeless body was not horrifying to Victor, but the instant the Creature has life he

is terrifying. There appears to be something inherent in the Creature that is terrifying to humans, giving them an immediate bias against him.

After Victor describes the Creature, he continues describing his reaction to what he has accomplished. He says

The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room...unable to compose my mind to sleep. At length lassitude succeeded to the tumult I had before endured; and I threw myself on the bed in my clothes, endeavouring to seek a few moments of forgetfulness. (Shelley 58-59)

Here Victor is noting the fact that he quickly changed his view on the Creature. He has spent almost two years of his life completely focused on his task, even at the expense of his own personal well being. Yet his beautiful dream is now completely gone and all Victor sees is horror. With the same amount of intensity that he desired to complete his task, he now desires to take back and forget the experience. Victor is “unable to endure the aspect of the being [he] had created”. He genuinely cannot stand the sight of the Creature. If there was a person who should be able to overcome the Creature’s physical presence, it is Victor. Not only is Victor the creator, but he also put so much of his own time and effort into the creature. But the Creature’s body is too hideous. Furthermore, Victor attributes his change in feeling to “human nature”. This contrasts with the horrifying description that the reader is just given of the Creature. Here Victor is explaining the creature’s disgusting body, and explaining his reaction to it as human nature. Humans will instinctively deny the Creature because of the way he looks, yet the Creature is made from human bodies and most desires to belong to the community of humans. By sheer definition, the Creature cannot have “human nature.” Human nature is a way of behaving that all humans are born with. It is a phrase that describes the way humans are inclined to react to situations based on the fact that they are humans. It is something that humans have naturally, but since the creature is not a naturally occurring being he does not have human nature. The Creature will also be unable to understand human nature. He is not equipped with the knowledge of how humans behave, and does not understand it. The Creature is not a human that was born, he is a being that was made. Therefore by definition he is lacking human nature, and it is this human nature that causes people to exclude the Creature.

Victor goes on to tell Walton the following:

Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived. (Shelley 59)

Again, Victor is reiterating that a human cannot accept the visual appearance of the Creature. He is implying that there is something within humans that will not be able to support the idea of the hideous Creature. It is as if there is something inherent in the Creature that is making his rejection an inevitable absolute. This passage also supports my previous statement that it is only when the Creature actually has been given life that he becomes so hideous. Victor states that the creature's lifeless body had been ugly, but once life had been infused and the Creature began to move the image completely changed. Lifeless, the Creature poses no threat. Now that he has been given life, the Creature threatens to upset society.

The Creature is so horrifying because there is no other being similar to him. People are unequipped to deal with the sight of the creature. Victor made the creature, he is not something naturally occurring in nature. Therefore people cannot deal with him naturally. The reaction is to reject what one is seeing, because it should not exist. People have a visual prejudice against him; they assume he is a monster because he is ugly. People relate to each other due to having things in common, but visually the creature cannot relate to humans. There is no other being like him, so the creature cannot start his own community in which to exist. He is forced to look for one to assimilate into. But the humans are unwilling to accept something that looks the way he does physically.

The creature's appearance has greatly upset Victor, but we see that only after seeing a human friend of his does Victor calm down. It is human nature to feel better when one is near someone similar to oneself. This is what happens to Victor. Victor has left his house and has begun to wander because he does not wish to deal with the event that has just occurred. Victor's description of what he views includes the following phrases:

"Morning, dismal and wet, at length dawned"

"[I] felt impelled to hurry on, although drenched by the rain which poured from a black and comfortless sky."

"I continued walking...endeavouring by bodily exercise to ease the load that weighed upon my mind."

"My heart palpitated in sickness of fear...not daring to look about me"

(Shelley 60)

Conclusion

Victor is extremely distraught. The life and language has been achieved by the Creature still unaccepted in the society as it is rightly remarked by scholars and educationists that the naturally born creation is nurturing into an acceptable being through proper development of all instincts. To be a 'being' (lifelihood) and acquisition of language cannot make a person civilized alone but are part and aspects for the living a culturally equipped society.

Everything around Victor perceives as bleak, and his only desire is to find a way to forget about what has just occurred. These phrases show that Victor is completely distressed. It seems as if

he will not be able to calm himself or become cheerful for quite some time. Yet Victor is almost immediately cheered up when his friend Henry Clerval arrives to visit. Victor says that

Nothing could equal my delight on seeing Clerval; his presence brought back to my thoughts my father, Elizabeth, and all those scenes of home so dear to my recollection. I grasped his hand, and in a moment forgot my horror and misfortune; I felt suddenly, and for the first time during many months, calm and serene joy. (Shelley 61)

The people in the novel are completely unwilling to try to understand and accept the creature. He is a being capable of emotion and reasoning, yet because of his physical body he is completely excluded. It is human nature to reject those that look different from yourself. The creature's body does not allow him to be considered human, and he therefore is not afforded human rights. Language is a cultural aspect, and therefore the creature's acquisition of it does not afford him humanity. His nature remains the same, and his nature is not human. When Victor does not give the creature a mate, he denies him ever having acceptance. The creature needed a similar being to be accepted, as he would never be allowed to enter human society. Being the only one of his kind, the creature was destined to exist outside of humanity.

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