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The Devaluing of Life in Shelley's FRANKENSTEIN

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Much of the recent criticism of *Frankenstein* centers on the role of Dr. Frankenstein as the failed creator. Feminist critiques tend to focus on this theme (as pointed out by Ellen Cronan Rose in her 1995 article “Custody Battles”) and explain it as an example of the male inability to procreate. But this explanation doesn't go far enough because it relies on sexist generalizations of male ability. I will argue that it is Dr. Frankenstein's devaluing of life for the sake of social standing that leads to his downfall as both a creator and a person, and leads to the monster wreaking havoc throughout the novel.

Victor Frankenstein doesn't value life in the absolute. Instead, he places a higher worth on his reputation. He wants to join the new class of learned men that has replaced the landed gentry as the upper society in Europe. Patricia McKee argues that in the late eighteenth century knowledge replaced reason as the controlling element in public life (222), resulting in a shift in social classes based on knowledge that created a “ruling class of gentlemen” and a “lower class” of women (221–22). Frankenstein's desire to enter this ruling class at the expense of others plays as a major theme throughout the novel. Outside his own closed social group, consisting of his family and a single friend, Clerval, Victor has no real friendships. Victor, “who had never been surrounded by amiable companions,” finds himself “alone” when he goes to university and begins his quest for enlightenment (93). Although Victor says he will have to “form [his] own friends” in Ingolstadt, he never does, at least not in the traditional sense. Instead, he latches onto the prospect of his reputation and resolves to “enter the world and take [his] station among other[s],” which of course leads him to literally form his own “friend”—the monster (93).

This turn in Victor's thinking reflects not so much to the failure of the male to procreate as the failure of one man to value life. Upon discovering the secret to reanimating dead corpses, Victor endeavors to create a being like himself. Yet in doing so he admits that he may not fully succeed but rather only lay the groundwork for "future success" (101). He also confesses that "the minuteness of the parts forme[s] a great hindrance to [his] speed" (101). In these two admissions we come to understand that Victor doesn't value the life he is to create so much as what the creation will give him—a place in history as the (in)famous father of reanimating dead flesh. If he truly valued life, Victor wouldn't embark on his travail until he was prepared and dedicated to the creation and rearing of a living being. This failure of Frankenstein to value life over fame becomes the wellspring of his suffering.

In this light, the rest of the novel reads as the story of a man who at every turn is given the opportunity to put the lives of others before himself. Immediately upon animating the monster, Victor becomes overwhelmed by the physical repulsiveness of the life he has created and flees from the very thing over which he has toiled for two years (105). This speaks to Victor's unwillingness to deal with his creation as a living being. Perhaps if Victor had valued the life he created—and helped the monster at this critical moment—he would have prevented most (if not all) of the devastation that follows. But he fears what people will think of him for creating a monstrosity and abandons his creation at the moment it enters the world, thus preserving his reputation but placing his family (and the world) at risk.

As Shelley's novel unfolds, Victor ends up losing three family members and two family friends. Ostensibly, they are victim's of the monster, but they actually die because of Victor's desire to maintain his reputation. William dies because Victor shunned the monster at the moment of creation and left him to suffer at the hands of other men, causing the monster to become vindictive and violent. The execution of Justine for William's murder, too, stems from Victor's vanity: he refuses to admit to his role in William's death. Victor justifies his silence, saying it is unnecessary to divulge the truth because of the "circumstantial" nature of the case against Justine (126). Truly, however, he once again fears for his reputation when he remarks that "my tale [is] not one to announce publicly; its astounding horror would be looked upon as madness by the vulgar" (127). After dismantling the monster's "Eve," Clerval, who throughout the novel plays the role of Victor's redeemer, falls victim to the monster because Victor never warns him of the danger. Victor reasons that by refusing to finish the female monster he is saving humanity (211), but really it is Victor's inability to see the monster's own value, and not his concern for the world, that leads him to leave his "Adam" without a mate. This, of course, drives the monster to kill again, inevitably putting humanity back at risk.

Finally, Elizabeth and Victor's father die. Superficially, the monster is to blame; he kills Elizabeth, and her death burdens her father with too much grief for him to bear. But really they die because Victor has yet to admit to anyone that he created the monster. His pride leads him to lie in silence while everyone around him suffers and dies. Victor doesn't go to the authorities to confess his ungodly actions until months after the death of his father. And by then it's too late. Only at the end of the novel does Victor forsake his reputation—along with the possibility of becoming a great father of science—and sacrifice his own life to deal with the monster (260). This can be seen by his refusal to tell Captain Walton the secrets of his creation and through the loss of his own life; both of which Victor could have saved had he not finally come to value life above personal gain. Still, Shelley shows us that Victor doesn't grasp this universal maxim. He continues to assert that reputation should be a superior motive for action to preserving life because, when Victor (wrongly) assumes that Captain Walton and his men will continue on in their quest to find the Northwest Passage to the Pacific, he says, "You were hereafter to be hailed as the benefactors of your species, your names adored as belonging to brave men who encountered death for honour and the benefit of mankind" (257).

In the end, Victor's story has such an effect on Captain Walton that Walton agrees to return to England; the search for fame isn't worth the sacrifice of innocent lives (258). And herein lies one of the novel's major lessons, that the devaluing of life for personal gain leads inevitably to great personal suffering.

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