

Jack Pattarini

Professor Quinn

WR120: The Gothic

Academic Argument 2

16th December, 2022

SOMETHING I CAN NEVER HAVE:

FRANKENSTEIN AND THE INDIFFERENCE OF THE NATURAL ORDER

Introduction

The end of Mary K. Shelley's "Frankenstein" is often read as the restoration of social order through the deaths of Victor and his creature, two disruptive characters now expelled from this order. In this interpretation, Victor is a man with repressed urges and his creature is the personification of those urges. I believe that this greatly mischaracterizes the two characters. If this interpretation is true, and Victor and his creature are simply victims of an oppressive society, what incentive is there for Victor to forfeit his creature's humanity? In addition to this, if this reading is true, I would argue that neither characters are particularly disruptive to society, but only to each other. While the two do hurt Victor's family both direct and indirectly, it would not be fair to say that this hurts society as a whole. Neither character is a *menace to society*. In my reading, Victor is the personification of the social order, and his creature is the personification of nature.

Social order is not restored through the death of Victor and his creature, it is challenged. The audience is not invited, but rather forced to accept the triumph of nature over a humanity corrupted by blind desire and self-interest, leaving the reader to question the validity of social

norms on them as seen through the representations of society and nature in Victor and his creature, the misguided and arbitrary dehumanization of the creature, and the fundamental powerlessness society has against the forces of nature.

Reading “Frankenstein” through the lens of Eve Sedgwick who, in her book “Epistemology of the Closet” views the Gothic through the lens of queer studies, further contextualizes the book in the world it was written in. Sedgwick specifically mentions the Gothic as a mechanism for men, be it male authors or reader, to engage with homosexual urges. Sedgwick writes, “Homophobia found in the paranoid Gothic a genre of its own... through a more active, polylogic engagement of 'private' with 'public' discourses, as in the wildly dichotomous play around solipsism and intersubjectivity of a male paranoid plot like that of Frankenstein.” (183). Perceiving homosexuality as a problem simply to oneself prevents them from expressing that they even have these urges to others. In this sense, homophobia is a self-policing system that relies on the mutual ignorance and paranoia of men to prevent sexual consciousness that could threaten the singular sexuality of the social order. While it could be read that Victor is an individual engaging with repressed urges on an individual level, I would argue that this still does not provide adequate reasoning to justify his abandonment of his creation. Victor’s active approach in irradiating these “urges” would imply that he *is* the social order. This also implies that society is as disruptive to nature as nature is to society.

i. Nature and Nurture

Firstly, Victor and his creature are extreme representations of critical but oftentimes contradicting elements of what it is, philosophically, to be human: Victor representing rationality, authority, and therefore, the need for order in chaos; while his creation is animalistic,

instinctual, and therefore, the chaos. More simply, Victor and his creature model the "Nature vs. Nurture" discussion and how we attribute the two to humanity's fundamental understanding of itself.

This debate pertains to "Frankenstein" by lending understanding to the motivations of both Victor and his creation. Social order is a human construct that organizes people to form a society; cooperation and collaboration within this system reaffirms its existence. A social order provides the regiment and security for individuals to disengage with the process of acquiring necessities like food and shift their attention towards exploration and rational thought.

Diametrically opposing this, there is nature, which is chaotic, innate, and rigid. Victor becomes social order itself as an agent acting on its behalf, and that his creation is disruptive and threatens the system he clearly benefits from. We see this in his retelling of his upbringing.

Victor recounts,

"I am by birth a Genevese, and my family is one of the most distinguished of that republic. My ancestors had been for many years counsellors and syndics, and my father had filled several public situations with honour and reputation." (16)

This quote supports that Victor must uphold social order because he directly benefits from it. Being of a respected family, the social order privileges Victor by giving him a secure upbringing, access to a higher education, and the ability to pursue his scientific interests. With this security and stability helping to establish clear rules and expectations for behavior, social order ensures that there is a sense of order and predictability in Victor's life. Victor's creation often challenges these expectations, disrupting society through murder, a blatant rejection of justice and fairness, constructs devised by the social order. His creature comes to represent nature itself as its very existence challenges the social order. Society must reevaluate their

understanding of humanity and nature if the dead can be resurrected with natural science.

Dissonance in the system, this is, division in thought amongst individuals compromising greater society, creates confusion and uncertainty which threatens to destabilize the social order. This can be seen multiple times in the text, but none are as salient than in Victor's obfuscation of the creature's eyes, which he describes saying, "...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 shrivelled complexion and straight black lips." (42). Representationally, the eye is often associated with knowledge and understanding. The process of seeing enables us to perceive and gather information from those perceptions which we then interpret, informing our opinions, decisions, etc. The eye and the act of seeing as a faculty enables rationality and, therefore, corrupting one's eyes would thereby imply the abandonment of this rationality, as Victor does.

The discussion of "Nature vs. Nurture" is heavily tied to Sedgwick's take on the Gothic as a literary movement, particularly on how society deems something to be taboo. There is nothing unnatural about homosexuality, but the social order— an extension of the concept of nurture— conflicts with this view to affirm it's own agenda.

ii. The Malignant Devil

Secondly, the triumph of nature can be seen in Victor, established in the first argument as representing social order, abandoning logic to try and dehumanize the creature. Rationality attempts to align perspective with what is objective in this world, even though there is no objectivity in our existence and no way to remove the corruptive influences of bias. Therefore, objectivity as we know it is merely a perspective, only that it is a largely accepted one that we

align other perspectives to, thereby lending credibility by this association. Rationality mimics the objective in the conscious mind because of this deficiency, and often topples under scrutiny when one finds an agenda, biases, etc. and "Frankenstein" taps into this frequently. While Victor maintains an air of objectivity in his characterization of his creature, but it is evident that his perceptions are driven emotions and personal prejudices. With disregard to the appearance of victor's creation, his creature would be considered virtuous in society as Victor intended, revered for his strength, admired for his compassion, and respected for his intelligence. There are several instances in which the actions of Victor's creation invalidate Victor's opinion of it and that in spite of this, Victor maintains his sentiments. His creature displays both it's intelligence and empathy all throughout the second volume of the novel explaining how it learned English through sheer observation and aided the family of a blind man. In their conversation, the creature explains to Victor, "I am malicious because I am miserable. Am I not shunned and hated by all mankind?" (120)The creature is able to perceive how others see it while also being able to perceive itself and note the one-sided nature of its abuse, all the while explaining it eloquently. In this short quote, there is a comparison, reflection, and, overall, an exceptional level of humanity displayed within it.

What is more egregious is how Victor actualizes his responsibility for his creature. Victor accepts responsibility but opts to hunt the creature instead of embracing his creature even as it pleads with him for acceptance, or defying his promise to create a companion for the creature and killing it in front of the creature.

There is no founding for Victor's notions on his creation, and maintaining his views on it as a creature even in the presence of compelling evidence suggests the desperation to "other" the creature for some other, more shameful and disingenuous reason. To discredit Victor, the arbiter

of rationality, discredits rationality as a driving factor in his passionate hatred for his creation, an overcompensation to the overwhelming reality that his creature is just as human, as deserving of love, respect, and just as capable as he is. In the end, it is important that this is all that Victor wanted by creating his creature, and that his basis for rejecting it is entirely unfounded. As to Victor's assertion that creature is natural, his creation could have only existed under the laws of natural science, and it seems he merely regrets his experimentation.

To Sedgwick, this entirely irrational objection to his creature's humanity and arbitrary reason for such a stance closely models the response of the social order to ideas of sexual plurality and how homophobia is oftentimes disguised under the guises of rationality: that individuals in society can possess different and unfamiliar sexual orientations to one another, thereby threatening the singular sexuality that is the glue of the social order. Because there is no founding in objectivity for such a stance, the argument falls apart in its clear agenda to preserve sexual homogeneity.

iii. Indifference of Nature

Lastly, the triumph of nature is demonstrated through the indifference of nature. We see this both before and after Victor's death. To add insult to injury, his creature demonstrates this by twisting the systems Victor benefits from against him, such as in the execution of Justine for the murder of William, in which his creature framed her. Victor recounts, "...the result of my curiosity and lawless devices would cause the death of two of my fellow-beings: one a smiling babe, full of innocence and joy; the other far more dreadfully murdered, with every aggravation of infamy that could make the murder memorable in horror." (62). While many who analyze Frankenstein read Victor and his creature as disruptive, this viewpoint disregards the central

conflict of the entire novel. His creature's actions are reactions to the mistreatment he faces at the hands of his creator, whether it be the murder of William for his abandonment or the killing of Elizabeth for Victor defying his promise to make his creature a companion.

Ultimately, nature triumphs over Victor and therefore, society, in the climax of the book as Victor succumbs to exhaustion and the cold of the Arctic in his mission to kill his creature. Many think that both Victor and his creature die in the end and that order is restored by this, but there is no indication that his creature actually does die.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this reading of “Frankenstein” presents a challenge to the common interpretation of the novel that social order is restored through the deaths of Victor and his creature. Instead, the novel shows how human nature overtakes rationality when the system goes unchecked. Humanity is as much nature as it is nurture and the system will equalize. Through the lens of queer studies, it is understood how the battle between human nature and social order is modelled in homophobia. This reading is further supported by the representation of society and nature in the characters, the dehumanization of the creature, and the relationship between social norms and individual desire. Through this, the reader is forced to question the social norms they live under and how they complement or oppose the natural world.

Work Cited

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, et al. *Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus: Annotated for*

Scientists, Engineers, and Creators of All Kinds. The MIT Press, 2017.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. 2008.