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The Erasure of Education

A seminal work like Mary Shelley’s 1818 thought-provoking novel *Frankenstein* exudes a certain caliber of poignancy that stands stark even against the work of immortalized patriarchal Romantic poets like Byron, Wordsworth, and even her husband Percy Blythe Shelley. Its debut was disruptive to say the least…In an excerpt published in 1818 in *Edinburgh* Magazine, Sir Walter Scott regards the novel of a “nature so peculiar, [it’s]a production of the modern school in its highest style of caricature and exaggeration”, claiming that there was never a wilder story ever imagined. It’s a novel, a sort of weird marriage between gothic literature and science fiction that encapsulates the mind and allows it to conjure up any number of imaginative fancies almost at will. More prominently though on the opposing side of this, Lawrence Lipking surmises a contemporary problem with modern readers of Shelley. In his essay entitled *Frankenstein: The True Story* Lipking states that“everybody seems misunderstand the scope of it, or more accurately, hundreds of millions of people who have never read the book think they know what it’s about.”

Patrick Brantlinger corroborates my own thoughts on the matter when he states in his essay *The Reading Monster* that “What has seemed ultimately most monstrous and therefore most difficult for readers of Frankenstein over the years to accept is precisely the Monster’s literacy; Especially stage versions, where the ‘Calibanized’ mute monster with darkened skin color conjured up the slavery controversy (Brantlinger 474). This is not to say that an exploration between mankind’s debasing treatment of *the other* as depicted by the characters of Caliban and Frankenstein is necessarily a *wrong* reading, but I believe it to be a misguided one propelled by an audience’s inability to sometimes filter out the mechanism of modern reactions to the original text. To read *Frankenstein* in this light, envisioning the monster as a wordless confused beast would lose a certain self-consciousness in the Monster that is integral to Shelley’s larger intricate expositions of human nature.

One thing we have to recognize, as Brantlinger states, is that *Frankenstein* is, among other things, above all a novel about two *educations*, or rather, mis-educations. Ultimately, it is a task challenging task to attempt to understand Victor’s progressive relationship towards his creation without understanding the intellectual growth of the Monster in relation to himself, the society that ultimately rejects him, and his creator. I agree with Lipkings statement that Shelley’s own obsession with the need to repair her own lack of instruction, despite both of her parents being distinguished educators may have a correlation to Rousseaunian educational theory.

Rousseau as I understand him was a philosopher and educational theorist native to Geneva, where a good portion of our novel in question takes place, who believed that humans are not born with the element of original sin, are born ‘basically good’ and are only corrupted by a sour infiltration into society as it acts negatively upon them. One imagines the story of Wordsworth’s Michael, whose only son was unretrivably tainted by city life vice. By proxy of this, Rousseau believed that a rural setting is an ideal place for children to learn. Basically he felt that children should be shielded from societal pressures so that the natural tendencies child could merge and grow without any unwarranted corruption. We can already see the parallels here between Rousseau’s depiction of Emile, in this self-titled work *Emile,* being tutored far away from the city, and the hidden “imperceptible chink” our Monster views society through, as well as the rural forestry mountain peaks and ice caves he can so easily roam through.

Rousseau tenant is roundly surmised in the following statement….

“When he is ready to learn and is interested in language, geography, history and science, he will possess the inner direction necessary to learn. This learning would grow out of the child's activities. He will learn languages naturally through the normal conversational activity.

The assumption here is that Emile's motivation leads to the purposive self-discipline necessary to acquire knowledge. It is a flowing out rather than an infiltration from without. Brantlinger sums up this point nicely in his essay *The Reading Monster* when he says that “the Monster’s bildungsroman both parallels and contrasts with Victor’s. Learning to speak and read in isolation, he observes and is voyeuristic, gleaming through his ‘imperceptible chink’. The family, he goes on to observe, represents everything Victor has rejected in undertaking his alchemical studies. It seems that to the extent that Victor pursues his personal studies, Brantlinger suggests, he is only “sort of” an autodidactic, whereas the Monster is perforce a full autodidact, or self-taught. To escape that these societal pressures, Victor reverts back to Gothic superstition, while our Monster takes solace in the cathartic nature of language (Brantlinger 470)

For there is no doubt that our Monster is eloquent, echoing cadences of Othello’s lyrical voice and the rhetoric of Milton’s Satan. In the very first words of his narrative he speaks to Victor he proves himself to be a supreme rhetorician, presses him with ‘reasonable ultimatums’ and ‘calm entreaties’. Beyond this, though, it is important to register, Peter Brooks urges, Shelley’s seemingly irreconcilable portrayal of the monster physically putrid with counterpointing and elevated language capacity. Peter Brooks notes that he is the most eloquent creature in the novel. “The Hideous creature, far from expressing himself with grunts and gestures, speaks and reasons with the highest eloquence, logic, and persuasiveness…as a verbal creature, he is the very opposite of monstrous (Brooks 371).

Why then, do so many adaptations of Shelley’s work choose to portray the Monster as completely and utterly incapable of expressive faculties? I have to again cite Brooks whose idea is that like so much else in the history of the Monsters education through, overhearing, and observing sensory input and associative ideas, his discovery of language corroborates certain tenants of Enlightenment thinking, who see language as emanating from emotion rather than any kind of biological need. Take for example the Monsters exchange with Victor about his consummation into the world of physical and mental sensory input. Many critics, Lipking reveals, believe this particular scene, his “gradual dawn into consciousness” as the best of the entire book. Take the following lines for example…

“It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the aura of my being: all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct. A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, and I felt….A stronger light pressed upon my nerves, so that I was obliged to shut my eyes. Darkness then came over me, and troubled me…I began to observe, with greater accuracy, the forms that surrounded me…Sometimes I tried to imitate the pleasant songs of the birds, but was unable. Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again…(Shelley 71)

The irony here is that the Monster recognizes his own monstrosity, but is able presently to relate it in words that read almost like poetry in their cadences, in a civilized manner. He would have been perfectly fine adapting to his senses without the communicative aspect. Or would he have been? Though the Monster may have at one time actually been beastly, he is redeemed by the innocence of his own becoming. Lipkin argues that the creature is simply just “too good”. He acknowledges the fact of other critics seeing the Monster as an “unfallen and innocent creature who feels love and sympathy as readily has hunger or pain. And that he develops as if nature has educated him (Lipking 430). Everything good in his short life springs from the chthonic elements of wilderness and solitudes of ice caves streaked throughout the novel and everything bad from any encounter with humans he’s had. He’s literally run out of town on one occasion, unfalteringly taking abuse after abuse, though he strives most honestly to cultivate his faculties of reason and experience as a means of transcendence from the role of “the other” in order to form a genuine human connection.

Brooks’ and my own sentiments here are similar; that as the Monster encounters it, language seems to be tethered to human love and patterns of kinship as well as the models of relations themselves and the rejection thereof these very same models. In other words, in trying to enter into the paradigm of complex human relationships, the Monster’s own personal conception of language leads him to compensate the value of expressive and didactical language against his own ‘deficient nature’(Brooks 374-81). The Monster is inexplicably barred from intellectual equality and those who treat him poorly and demand exile and death in return.

The ‘god-like science’ of language offers him the “escape from monsterism,” which is precisely lack of relation and ‘apartness’ (Brooks 371). It has ‘proved deceptive’ to him, failed to ‘satisfy the conceptualization of his desire’. *Frankenstein* adaptations that oppress the Monster’s sonorous faculties of expression as a means to painstakingly parse his story are missing the point. Usually it is done for comedic effect and though there successful makes that are successful in portraying the monster comically inept, I feel there is a lot more to be found in reading into the profundity of his reasoning capabilities tragically doomed to ‘play the role of the monster’ because he is forced to be confined to it through no fault of his own.

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