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May 19, 2020
Final Paper: Thy Fallen Angel
1939 Words

Thy Fallen Angel: Disability Representation in *Frankenstein*

One form of prejudice that transcends geography or culture is discrimination against people with disabilities. "Disabilities" are generally defined as "*any condition of the body or mind that makes it more difficult for the person... to do certain activities and interact with the world around them*" (CDC). Because this is such a broad and complex topic, literature that portrays disability in a positive light is generally either technical or made for middle schoolers. However, one stunning exception is the classic novel, *Frankenstein*. But while the novel is a heartbreaking drama about family, creation, and the nature of humanity, many film adaptations reduce the story to a "mindless monster chase". One tragic example of this is James Whale's eponymous 1931 adaptation. This particular film strips the Creature of autonomy, particularly through the lack of any dialogue and the dramatic change to the ending. [1]

Frankenstein was originally published in 1818, by a 21-year old named Mary Shelley. Many believe she was inspired to write this distorted creation myth after the loss of her daughter after only twelve days. While this tragedy undoubtedly played a role, the inciting incident was an evening of ghost stories with her husband Percy Shelley and fellow writer Lord Byron (Holmes 372-373).

[1] For the purposes of this paper, the character in the novel is referred to as Peter, and his onscreen counterpart is simply the Creature

The classic Gothic novel tells the story of the Creature (who I renamed Peter years ago), a man sewn together and reanimated by the titular Dr. Victor Frankenstein. The "doctor" is repulsed by his creation and spends many years alternately avoiding and confronting Peter. Peter is rightly frustrated with Victor, but he misplaces that frustration and takes it out on Victor's younger brother William (Shelley 71), best friend Henry (Shelley 152-153), and fiancée/adopted sister Elizabeth[2] (Shelley 167). The novel ends with both protagonists dying and readers are left holding the burden of the story.

The classic character of the Creature has been interpreted as "a metaphor for various marginalized human identities, from Irish rebels to emancipated slaves" (Holmes 374). In particular, the character can especially be seen as a mirror for the experiences of people with disabilities. In the wise words of Joyce Carol Oates, the power of the narrative doesn't come from the "priggish, self-devoted scientist", but the "by way of the misshapen creature with whom most creatures identify" (Oates 545). I found the novel symbolic of many personal experiences, particularly relating to Peter's relationships with society.

This poignant and powerful story has attracted many filmmakers, and numerous movies, TV shows, and plays have attempted to capture the cavernous emotion of the story. One of the first and best-known adaptations is James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931), starring Colin Clive as the titular doctor and Boris Karloff as the Creature. (IMDB)

When discussing the movie, Samuel James points to the theory of "eugenics" that attempted to justify the horrific treatment of people with disabilities throughout history and

[2] I don't appreciate the incest, I don't get why it's a thing, that's a whole other field of study

summarizes that “Such historical abuse of the disabled underpins their stereotypical representation within cinema” (James 1).

The caustic effects of these stereotypes are directed at Peter from the moment he opens his eyes. Victor narrates his “birth” in the novel with these chilling terms;

> “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” (Shelley 60)

This reaction can be read as “an unsatisfactory parental response to the birth of a disabled child” (Holmes 374), and the poor newborn giant is forced to flee and fend for himself. Unfortunately, many disabled children are born to unprepared parents and treated not as a loving gift, but a family burden. Joyce Carol Oates argues that “..it is inevitable that the creature be a *profane* thing. He cannot be blessed or loved” given his unnatural origins (Oates 551). While this course is fated in the context of the story, readers can recognize the horrible tragedy of this pattern and change it.

In the 1931 film adaption, the Creature is created using the “defective” brain of a criminal as opposed to a “standard” brain. The distinctions between these two are clearly and repeatedly highlighted throughout the first act (James 2-3). Because this particular detail was left out of the novel, it highlights the negative connotations of disability and the unfair parallels to violence and sub-humanity.

In the novel, Peter leaves for a time and makes his own way in the world. He encounters the De Lacy family, befriends the blind father, and learns to read which leads him to question his

existence. When he is discovered and chased off, he eventually comes face to face with his creator again and begs for mercy, pleading,

> "Remember, that I am thy creature. I ought to be thy Adam but I am rather thy fallen angel, whom thou didst turn from joy for no misdeed… How can I move thee? Will no entreaties cause thee to turn a favorable eye upon thy creature, who implores thy goodness and compassion? Believe me, Frankenstein, I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone?" (Shelley 93)

This poignant and pitiful plea comes in the middle of the first meeting between Peter and Victor after being apart for many months. From a mental newborn who couldn't speak, Peter has grown into quoting Milton and contemplating his own creation and existence; yet all Victor can see is the physically deformed body. Victor is so shocked and disgusted by Peter that he doesn't take so much as a second to explore his unconventional son's mind or heart. Joyce Carol Oates describes the novel as a "gloss upon or rejoinder to" Paradise Lost (Oates 543), and the allusion to Lucifer drives home Peter's perceived monstrosity. Oates expands on these parallels, calling the titular scientist

> "a demonic parody (or extension) of Milton's God… the creator of mankind; but at the same time… totally unable to control the behavior of his demon (variously called "monster", "fiend," "wretch," but necessarily lacking a name)" (Oates 545).

I understand that the Creature of the novel lacks a name for important symbolic and literary reasons, but I believe he undergoes enough trauma in the story. In common discourse, the Creature is named Adam or Prometheus, but I named him after Peter Parker.

Unfortunately, many modern filmmakers have seen through Victor's eyes, portraying only a grunting cyborg who kills without a thought. This is particularly evident in Whale's adaptation. However, Karloff interpreted Peter as "a pathetic creature who, like us all, had neither wish nor say in his creation and certainly did not wish upon itself the hideous image…" (James 6). This compassion on Karloff's part is a welcome breath of fresh air, one that more people would benefit from.

One of the classic "gags" of Frankenstein on film is the reactions of others upon seeing him, usually of exaggerated terror or disgust. But Holmes points out that within the novel,

> "The dynamics of the *social construction of deformity* are central to the Creature's narrative of development. He is narrated as 'deformed' and 'ugly'... but nothing in the textual evidence allows us to establish.. the source of such assessments" (Holmes 378, emphasis added).

This is a key factor in the experience of many individuals with disabilities. Those who look different in any way are often immediately assessed and categorized. In the modern world, fear and disgust are likely to be replaced with confusion and condescension-and yes I speak from personal experience on this matter. :)

In the same conversation, Victor expresses utter hatred for Peter, and cruelly threatens to end his existence. In response, Peter calmly says "You accuse me of murder; and yet you would, with a satisfied conscience, destroy your own creature (94). This simple and profound analysis gets to the central question of the novel: who is the true monster? As Oates aptly summarizes, "Surely one of the secrets of Frankenstein, which helps to account for its abiding appeal, is the

demon's patient, unquestioning, utterly faithful, and utterly human love for his irresponsible creator." (Oates 545)

Later in the book, Peter tracks down Victor again and makes a simple but profound request: "You must create a female for me with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being" (Shelley 128). This is one of few examples of Peter "claiming companionship as a right, [even though] he has a firm sense of restrictions on that right…" (Holmes 382). Victor agrees, not out of love for his unconventional son, but out of fear of retribution for failing. Victor is horribly afraid that Peter and his mate will reproduce, and so eventually "I… trembling with passion tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged. The wretch saw me destroy the creature on whose future existence he depended for happiness.." (Shelley 145). Peter is rightly upset, grieved, distraught, and once again begs for mercy from his cruel creator: "Shall each man… find a wife for his bosom and each beast have its mate, and I be alone? I had feelings of affection and they were requited by detestation and scorn" (Shelley 146). Frankenstein's destruction of the bride is reminiscent of "involuntary sterilization" of people with disabilities and other minorities (Holmes 381). Holmes argues that "Victor's eugenicist and erotophobic actions towards his second creation enact a response to a disabled adult's sexuality" (Holmes 375). While most disabled adults in American society aren't explicitly forbidden from finding love, there are definitely cultural taboos that hinder this process.

After a lifetime of cat-and-mouse, Victor and Peter meet for the last time aboard Captain Walton's ship. Victor has fallen ill and died, and Peter has these parting words for Captain Walton:

> "Fear not that I shall be the instrument of future mischief. My work is nearly complete. Neither yours nor any man's death is needed to consummate the series of my being...but it requires my own." (Shelley 188)

This quote appears on the final pages of the story, before Peter jumps off the boat, disappearing into the ocean. He plans to "collect a funeral pile and consume to ashes this miserable frame…" (Shelley 188), seeing no purpose or hope in his existence. What strikes me about this ending is the lack of redemption. Both characters die, although Victor arguably gets an unfairly better deal. Sadly, this hopelessness and despair has all too often marked the lives of those with disabilities. But while the novel fully explores the tragedy of conscious hopelessness, the Creature's end in the movie is far less rational.

The 1931 movie ends with the Creature being trapped in a mil set on fire by the villagers. James calls this tragic ending a "'eugenics finale' with society, apparently, destroying the disabled minority group." (James 8). While both versions end in the Creature's demise, the distinction between suicide and murder is an important one. Even in his final moments, James Whale's Creature lacks any semblance of autonomy.

These two vastly different approaches to the iconic character have had disproportionate effects on cultural perceptions. Most people associate the name Frankenstein not with the profound philosophical questions of the novel, but with the grunts of the monster with electrodes in his neck. This movie doesn't directly comment on perceptions of disability, but character distortions like these far outweigh positive examples of Mary Shelley's creation. There is a sharp difference between adapting a story and destroying a story, much like the difference

between creating a human and an animal. James Whale and other filmmakers ought to recognize this and show some more nuance for stories of the fallen angels.

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