

Victor Frankenstein: Trodden Hero or Veiled Villain?

Mary Shelley's masterpiece analyzed.

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Victor Frankenstein suffers decision paralysis in any time of crisis. While valiant in his struggles to create life, he immediately becomes the coward, assuming his creation to be a menace and running from it in terror: “one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped and rushed downstairs” (Shelley 51). It's hard to trust Victor to be a reliable narrator, when he claims helplessness with such vigor, for example, in the second encounter with his monster, he recounts, “I thought of pursuing the devil, but it would have been in vain” (70). When the creature kills little William and frames Justine, Victor does nothing to save her from her unjust execution: “a declaration would have been considered as the ravings of a madman and would not have exculpated her who suffered through me” (76). He is merely pacifying his conscious with a shallow justification.

This aversion to action is a persistent theme throughout the novel. These examples just scratch the surface:

- “I could not answer” (83).
- “The being finished speaking and fixed his looks upon me in the expectation of a reply. But I was bewildered, perplexed, and unable to arrange my ideas sufficiently” (146).
- “I would have seized him, but he eluded me” (172).
- “I was unable to pursue the train of thought . . . and I wept bitterly” (189). Frankenstein finds solace in crying over his dilemma.

This is his flawed argument for destroying the female monster: “she might become ten

thousand times more malignant than her mate and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness” (169). Has Victor not already heard the monster's lengthy tale of how he became soured on humanity? It is established that the monster's malice is due to others mistreating him, so Victor's argument seems merely an excuse to abandon his work.

Dr. Frankenstein continually underestimates the being's malice and power. Even after two murders, he taunts, “you may torture me, but I will never consent” (146). Is he so blind to not see that he is condemning his friends and family to death, rather than himself? Further, he interprets “I shall be with you on your wedding-night” (172) to mean that Elizabeth is not in danger. He looks ahead: “in that hour I should die and at once satisfy and extinguish his malice,” the only negative being the “tears and endless sorrow, when [Elizabeth] should find her lover so barbarously snatched from her” (173). Victor justifies going forward with the wedding, purporting that the monster will do what he pleases anyway: “he did not consider that threat as binding him . . . he had murdered Clerval immediately” (194). Yet somehow, he is shocked and dismayed when Elizabeth is murdered (202). Did he not hear his creature's pleas for a companion, or is he blind to both apportioned revenge, and the axiom, “misery loves company”? Is not the death of Victor's wife the most logical revenge for the death of the monster's would-be wife? The monster promises such revenge outright: “Shall each man . . . find a wife for his bosom . . . and I be alone? . . . Are you to be happy while I grovel in the intensity of my wretchedness?” He goes on to say, “you shall repent of the injuries you inflict” (172), foreshadowing drawn out misery for the doctor, rather than a hasty death. Apparently, Mr. Frankenstein never learns.

Why did Shelley write Victor this way? First, we can identify a literary element: if Victor stops the monster before he commits murders, the book would not be interesting. But it is more—perhaps it is because we are so quick to trust and empathize with Victor, as he is the

narrator throughout the tale, that we must come to see, through his indifference, he is actually more evil than his creation. When I first read the book, I pegged Frankenstein as good. Even though he admits to being the murderer several times, such as this lamentation: “I, not in deed, but in effect, was the true murderer” (88), to me, he is only crying for help, like Justine's coerced confession (81-82). However, through the above analysis, we find that Frankenstein is apt to be an unreliable narrator, biased to support his inaction. His warning of the monster: “he is eloquent and persuasive; and once his words had even power over my heart: but trust him not” (216), may better describe himself. As in legal tort, he has a “duty to rescue” his family from his now malevolent creation, yet he continually ignores it; his best idea is repeatedly shouting “wretched devil!” and “abhorred monster!” (95), followed by promising to create a woman, only to “[tear it] to pieces” (170). For the monster, this is sadistic torment, but the doctor excuses himself again, claiming it to be preferable to “[inflicting] this curse upon everlasting generations” (170). In the words of Edmund Burke, “no passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear,” and I see that Frankenstein is crippled by fear, wavering on any decision. Shelley has written a subtle allegory between the lines: do not believe narration immediately, as even if it appears trustworthy, it is always written in the interests of the narrator. Frankenstein tells us many times that his fate is sealed: “destiny was too potent, and her immutable laws had decreed my utter and terrible destruction” (33), but he really is a man who loves misery—a murderer through negligence, who wishes for pity in his twisted account. He is the real devil.

Going further, there is a connection that suggests Frankenstein subconsciously desires William and Justine to be struck dead. As a youth, he thinks of Elizabeth as “[his] more than sister, since till death she was to be [his] only” (26). In her ominous letter, she writes to the newly homesick Victor, “Justine has returned to us, and I assure you I love her tenderly,” and

“little darling William” has “sweet laughing blue eyes, dark eyelashes, and curling hair” (60).

His reluctance to pursue the monster (70) or exonerate Justine (76) could be out of selfishness—he will now have Elizabeth's love all to himself, despite her crushed spirit.

But wait—are you ready to take this to the next level? Maybe, just maybe, Frankenstein and his monster are one in the same. Frankenstein is Dr. Jekyll and the monster is Mr. Hyde, not through a scientific transformation, but dualistic personalities. Whenever the two appear together, be it in their discussions in the mountains, or encounters in the forest or arctic, there is no one around to see them. This quote is merely Frankenstein's dark side overtaking him: “you are my creator, but I am your master; — obey!” (171). After Elizabeth's murder, Frankenstein recollects, “I rushed towards the window, and drawing a pistol from my bosom, fired; but he eluded me” (202), followed by the monster vanishing, not to be found even after a search of several hours in and about the lake. Frankenstein himself admits, “we returned hopeless, most of my companions believing it to have been a form conjured up by my fancy” (202). Perhaps this is the truth? Afterwards, Victor mourns, “a fiend had snatched from me every hope of future happiness; no creature had ever been so miserable as I was” (203). Remaining “silent when [he] would have given the world to have confided the fatal secret” (191), I see that the secret is not that he created a monster; the secret is that he is the monster. This intensifies his guilt and seclusion, adds weight to his terrible illness and remorse, and gives truth to the statement he makes in his nightmarish haze: “Justine, poor unhappy Justine, was as innocent as I, and she suffered the same charge; she died for it; and I am the cause of this — I murdered her. William, Justine, Henry — they all died by my hands” (190). This is not the remorse of a moral but self-blaming man, but rather the admission of a bipolar assassin who is tortured by having no one with whom to share his monstrous deeds. When he says about the dæmon: “once his words even had power over my heart” (216), he is talking about the dark side of his conscious. The

whole act of creating a woman is to satisfy Frankenstein himself; he realizes that Elizabeth would never be his wife if she knew he was a blood-thirsty murderer, and so he wants a monster so that “we shall be more attached to one another,” “cut off from all the world” (147). I propose that all the references to monstrosity are metaphors for Victor's black heart, and that Shelley has created a work of art that is truly Romantic; the entire novel miserable and revolutionary, a battle of light versus dark, good versus evil, all wrapped up in one self-contradictory character. Shelley, by writing in such a complex undertone, has given her novel depth; it is infinitely more interesting than the standard good versus bad, white hat versus black hat, or even the edgier hubris (flaw of arrogance). The dualism is in the narrator's very statements: “Justine . . . was as innocent as I,” yet “they all died by my hands” (190); the inactive reader skips right over it. Frankenstein is the veiled villain.

Work Cited

Shelley, Mary. Frankenstein. New York: Random House, 1992.

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