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Frankenstein and The Meaning of Humanity

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Mary Shelley's groundbreaking 1818 novel, *Frankenstein*, questions the definition of what it means to be human, which was an important discussion at the time the novel was written due to the ever-increasing interactions between groups of indigenous people and European colonialists and explorers. When *Frankenstein* was first published, many people were fascinated with tales of "wild" tribes of natives in far-off places. While Europeans clearly saw human characteristics in the native people they encountered, they generally saw them as inferior and less intelligent, judging them based only on their appearance and lifestyle (Kant 637). During this time period, which was heavily influenced by the Enlightenment thought of the previous century, there was an ongoing discussion over whether non-European races belonged to the same species as Europeans.¹ David Hume, an Enlightenment philosopher, believed there were many species of humans, and that non-European species were "naturally inferior to the whites" (Hume 629). This differentiation between the "best" humans, Europeans, and other species of humans who were supposedly "less developed" allowed indigenous peoples to be placed below the barrier between human and animal (which created the "dignity of man") and became a very common justification for slavery and oppression (Browne 245). *Frankenstein* contradicts this philosophy by humanizing an artificial Creature composed of dead bodies and therefore challenging the Enlightenment's rigid idea of what it means to be human. With this progressive, broadened definition, anyone, even the "savages" whom Shelley's contemporaries looked down upon, could be human beings in their own right.

Victor Frankenstein's Creature is fundamentally connected to the natural world despite his artificial nature, as evidenced by his ability to live off a meager vegetarian diet and scale

¹ There were two sides to this debate—Polygenists and Monogenists, who believed that all human races were the same species (Browne 244).

mountains with relative ease (Shelley 76). He is isolated from European society and forced to live in the wild due to the horrified reactions he receives from other people, including his creator. The Creature is also clearly not European in appearance. He is far larger than a normal European, “about eight feet in height,” and has “yellow skin” which “scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath” and “straight black lips” (Shelley 39). This physical difference sets him apart from Europeans even though he was created by one. Because the Creature has been cast out of society due to his appearance, he is not part of the Enlightenment’s social contract, an unspoken agreement between all members of a nation to uphold each other’s natural rights. The people he meets, including Victor, violate their collective responsibility to respect his human rights, and he in turn violates theirs by committing murder later in the novel. This prevalent Enlightenment idea of the social contract creates a philosophical barrier between “natural man” and “civilized man.” Through the contract, man leaves the “state of nature” and becomes part of a civil society. Due to this concept, a deep connection to nature such as the one the Creature or many indigenous peoples have would likely have appeared uncivilized to most Europeans at the time *Frankenstein* was written.

In addition to, and (according to Enlightenment thought) in contrast to his portrayal as connected to nature, the Creature is a very human, emotional, and often sympathetic character. Despite his young age, he is just as eloquent as his creator and is almost as emotional, often waxing poetic about his misery (Shelley 114). He often acts more morally “human” than the people he meets—he refrains from retaliation when he is attacked by Felix (a young farmer whose house he stays in for some time) and when he saves a young girl only to be shot by her male companion (Shelley 110; 115). In both of these cases, he acts kindly and mercifully and is attacked without provocation by humans who judge him unfairly. This portrayal of the Creature

as physically non-European, self-educated, and yet undoubtedly human, can be applied to the natives in places such as South America that Europeans often encountered on journeys of exploration. Just like the Creature, the natives are judged on their appearance and their lifestyle, without regard to innate intelligence and despite their different upbringing. Since they are not (in general) permitted to live in European civilization, the only place they can live is in the state of nature. For the indigenous peoples, this is their home, but for the Creature, it is somewhere he is forced to go, living in the wild like he is a “savage” himself. Due to this parallel between the idea of “other” and nature, Shelley places the Creature in the same environment as native peoples—wilderness: be it the mountains of Switzerland where he takes refuge from the judgement of society, or the “vast wilds of South America”, where the Creature declares he will travel with the female counterpart he asks Victor to make for him (Shelley 120). The Creature himself appears to see his own connection to nature as a human quality, calling his plan to live in South America “peaceful and human” (Shelley 120). Shelly’s inclusion of this idea in her portrayal of the Creature implies that she herself sees natural connection as a human quality, which contradicts the Enlightenment thought that justifies racism against native peoples.

Though the monster is horrific in appearance, his mental ability rivals that of his creator, who though deeply flawed, is clearly very intelligent. The Creature has the full range of human emotion, great intelligence, and impressive physical fortitude—he is essentially a better version of man if his murderous tendencies and unsightly appearance are disregarded. If the Creature, seemingly a frightening “other” with a visceral connection to nature, can be viewed as human, so can indigenous people living in the wild who are also judged by their appearance and compared to European societal norms. While modern thought sees value in all cultures, Enlightenment thinkers saw themselves, European men, as the pinnacle of civilization and moral achievement

and all other cultures as lesser, at worst completely backwards and in the barbaric state of nature, or at best “noble savages” struggling on their way to becoming European. In the paradigm of the time, elevating native “savages” to the level of a being who is for all intents and purposes equal to a highly educated European gives legitimacy to the humanity of the natives. This equivalence between the Creature and non-European people subtly encourages the reader not to judge based on appearance, but on actions and ability. If the reader can see the Creature as human, they can also see any “other” as human if the “other” is given the chance to prove themselves. Shelley broadens the Enlightenment’s idea of what it means to be human by identifying a monster, despite his unique circumstances of creation, lifestyle, and appearance, as a true human being.

The Creature’s plight also serves as a cautionary tale, warning about the dangers of judging others based on physical appearance. While the readers and the author may see the Creature as human, the other characters do not. Men and women faint and flee at his appearance, and Victor calls him a “devil” and a “vile insect” (Shelley 110; 77). The Creature appears to be kind and innocent initially, but after he is treated badly because of his appearance and shunned by society and his creator, depriving him of a proper upbringing and socialization, he becomes bitter, angry, and lonely. This treatment causes him to act violently and revengefully and cause harm to others, fulfilling what Victor and others instantly thought of him—that he was a dangerous monster. However, his extreme guilt at the end of the novel maintains his depiction as human (Shelley 190). Racism can produce the same issues—when people are dehumanized and controlled by others who assume they are less-than because of their appearance, they can become violent in attempts to fight off oppression or in acts of revenge, therefore fulfilling assumptions about themselves by acting in a way they never would have without having been put in such a

situation. In this case, the creature acts as an extreme example of this effect—showing how negative judgement can affect any human's actions.

Shelley's expansion of the definition of humanity leads to a progressive vision that gives peoples seen as lesser based on physical and societal characteristics a chance at being fully human. It also encourages this broader definition by warning against the dangers of treating other humans with indignity. Through the parallels between the Creature and his existence in the state of nature and indigenous peoples around the world, both forms of the "other," Shelley's story encourages the reader to give all people a chance to prove themselves before judging them on appearance and treating them unfairly. If they are not given this chance, anyone, like the Creature, could become what they are unjustly expected to be due to the psychological damages of the way they have been treated. Ultimately, the realization that both the natives and the Creature are truly human but are not seen as so in society shows the weaknesses in the Enlightenment's racist yet idealized vision of humanity.

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