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**Monstrous Appearance and the  
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Reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*  
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# Monstrous Appearance and the Element of Unknown: A Parallel Reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Contemporary Media Narratives on Migrant Crisis in Europe

As one of the most prominent novels of the Gothic period, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is mostly remembered by its titular character. Set after the French Revolution, the titular character of *Frankenstein* represents a new kind of man, one that will rise from the poor and uneducated background and become a full member of society. However, his menacing and eerie appearance, albeit in stark contrast to his kind and gentle personality, deters people and results in his search for love and acceptance, and makes this transgression rather difficult. Through *Frankenstein*, a creature so different from other members of society, Shelley expressed her fear of the then-modern ideas embraced by the French Revolution, mainly the rise of lower classes of society, which were often perceived as inhuman, violent and inherently dangerous. In this paper, I will show that *Frankenstein* is intentionally portrayed as a dangerous member of society and that the notion of monstrosity that is applied in the novel has its modern-day equivalent in the recent migrations to Europe from the East.

## KEYWORDS

**monstrosity, unknown, migrants, media, the other**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* is one of the most prominent Gothic novels and is today most remembered for the character who is often called Frankenstein, but in the novel it is unnamed. This refers to the creature that Victor Frankenstein created as a result of his experiment and belief that people can be immortal. Anyone who has read the novel or has seen one of its numerous movie adaptations will remember the physical appearance of the creature. Its huge body, veins sticking through the skin and numerous stitches across the body all offer an eerie, scary contrast to his kind and gentle personality. With the novel being set in the period right after the French revolution, the creature can be characterized as the new kind of man that was being born in that period, rising from the uneducated, poor background to become a member of society. But unlike normal people who made this transgression relatively easily, the creature's main obstacle is its appearance, which deters people and results in its search for love and acceptance. Following from that, this essay will attempt to show that by creating such a creature that differentiates itself from the 'normal' society, Mary Shelly was expressing her fear of the then-modern ideas that were being embraced by the French revolution, mainly the rise of lower classes of society, which were often perceived as inhuman, violent and inherently dangerous. The goal is to show that the creature is intentionally portrayed as a dangerous member of society and that the notion of monstrosity applied in the novel has its modern-day equivalent in the recent migrations from the East, which are flooding Europe.

## 2. A NEW KIND OF MAN

As stated before, the key notion that created the effect of monstrosity in this novel is the French revolution and the birth of a new kind of man. The French Revolution was the event that changed the world of the time and steered the course of humanity towards what it is today. By affecting primarily the lower classes and granting them the natural rights of man, which were proclaimed in *The Declaration on the Rights of Man and Citizen*, it brought upon a change not only on the political scale, but more importantly on a cultural and social level. It made possible for an ordinary peasant to climb the social ladder primarily because of his education and hard work, which meant that the traditional structure of society would change. This also meant that the upper classes of society were no longer reserved to people because of their hereditary title or the fact that they were born into a noble family. When we add to that the rising notion of the reading public and the widespread presence of books that appeared in that time, we can agree with Heller (1999), a literary critic, that the novel "focuses on the problematic influence of experience – both

social and literary – on those vulnerable, unstable groups around whom cluster cultural concerns about education and reading.” The rise of the lower classes brought upon many changes to the up-to-then established societal structure as more and more poor villagers were coming to the cities to work in factories, but many of them were not able to find jobs due to machines that were substituting human labor in factories because of industrialization. This is why some literary critics argue that *Frankenstein* can be read in view of Luddite uprisings, which were happening in England during the 1810s (see O’Flinn 1983; Gardner 1994). At the time of such unrest, some conservative journals used images of “grave robbing, reviving the dead, and monsters who turn on their creators and destroy them, to warn of the dangers of liberal reform” (Gardner 1994, 72). Gardner also argues that the creature is similar to the Luddites as it believed that its master (in case of the Luddites it was the government) had the responsibility of providing for it, and if that was not upheld, then a rebellion could occur. The same occurs in *Frankenstein* as we observe the creature rebelling against its master when he refused to create a female companion so the creature could procreate.

The problem was that despite the ability to succeed in their life and the new changes in laws, the lower classes portrayed in the novel by the creature are still unaccepted by the rest of society. This is because changes in people’s views and mentality simply cannot transform and adapt as fast as laws, meaning that society still refused to accept ‘the third class’ citizens as equal. That can be seen in the novel in scenes where the creature is, despite its knowledge and experience, still seen as less worthy than Victor, even though they are more similar than different. The creature, even though it is poor and homeless, manages to educate itself on the books he could find, Goethe’s *Sorrows of Werther*, Plutarch’s *Lives*, and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, from which it manages to draw the knowledge it needs to understand the fact that what it reads in the books does not portray the real picture of the world. According to Heller (1999), “it is the gap between the ideal offered by this reading, and the reality that he confronts, that precipitates the monster’s crisis of identity and values.” The result of this crisis of identity is the anguish felt by the creature, as it cannot be accepted into society, which furthers the notion of monstrosity associated with it as it is portrayed as a social outcast banned from the rest of society. The very same thing occurs with the lower classes of society as they finally want to be accepted as inherent members of society, as is their right now, but they are still being looked down upon and taken advantage of, which leads them to essentially very similar path as that of the creature, a path of violent acts and destruction. In its destruction path, the creature focuses its anger on the most innocent of characters, which draws a parallel with the French revolution in which many innocent people were killed (Scribano 2015). Due to this, we have a perpetual circular motion of

discrimination as society uses violent nature of the lower classes as an excuse not to accept them as equal, which leads to destruction or violent acts by the lower classes. It is this ever-repeating cycle of discrimination out of which it is almost impossible to escape that fuels the creature's aggression and adds to its notion of monstrosity. However, unlike the rest of the people, the creature also suffers from physical deformations that make it harder for it to become a member of the middle-class society in which it desperately wants to be accepted. It is precisely the physical appearance that makes the creature stand out from the rest of the society and makes it easily identifiable. By being physically different from the rest of the society, it is immediately seen as a subject of suspicion whose presence and role in society should be questioned. This has an impact on both the creature and the society as both feel fear of what might happen, the society fears 'the stranger' and questions its motives, while the creature poses as a possible threat to the uniform fabric of society, which might disrupt their way of life.

### 3. THE MONSTROUS

The monstrosity ascribed to the creature does not only stem from its aggression and violent acts. From the first description of the creature, we are given the sense that even the creature's creator, Victor, is scared of what he created. Even though Shelley states that "his limbs were in proportion, and I [Victor] had selected his features as beautiful", we are soon given the real grim picture that "only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, (...) his shriveled complexion and straight black lips" (Shelley 1818, Chapter 5). Despite the fact that Victor succeeded in his experiment and successfully finished it, the first moment he sees "the wretch – the miserable monster" (Shelley 1818, Chapter 5) he created, he becomes frightened and runs away. The monstrosity of the creature's appearance is not so highly perceptive in the novel, as it is in the movie adaptations, especially the most famous one, Boris Karloff's portrayal of Frankenstein in the 1931 movie directed by James Whale. In the movie, it is not only the physical appearance that adds to the monstrosity, but also the way the creature is created. In the novel, the whole process is very mysterious, there are very little clues, except that Victor "dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay" (Shelley 1818, Chapter 4). We are basically left with a very obscure perception of how the entire process of creating the creature was achieved and because of that the creature, as a character, feels unfinished. In the novel, the creature's monstrosity is often associated with its aggression, which is "a by-product of disintegration, not an innate drive that has been cathartically unbound" (Sherwin 1981, 890). However, in the movie, the creature's monstrosity is not only the result of its creation,

but also the way it had been created, so Montag (2000, 388) argues that “...the monster is a product rather than a creation, assembled and joined together not so much by a man as by science, technology, and industry.” In the novel, there is no indication of how the creature was assembled or where from Victor got the needed material, while in the movie the notion of monstrosity can be perceived as being the result of using body parts of criminals who were hanged for their crimes. Shelley's intention to show that human nature and emotions are a result of complex social interactions gets diminished in the movie adaptation, where the focus is set on how the creature was assembled, not how it interacted with other people. By doing that, the movie adaptations send a stronger image than the novel itself, that evilness is inherent in some people and that they cannot fight it, they just have to suffer, just like the creature is doing throughout the novel. Even though the creature desperately tries to be accepted into the society, people cannot look over its physical appearance and that is one of the motives that are relevant even today. People tend to be afraid of the unknown, of something different, which the creature certainly is, as it looks so different from ordinary people. The creature simply represents an entity that is “dreadfully wronged by a society which cannot see the inner man for the outer form” (Malchow 1993, 105). Yet, people cannot look beside its physical appearance and accept it for its kindness and benevolent acts, from helping the De Lacey family survive the winter to saving the little girl from being drowned. It is precisely these acts that give the creature a sympathetic undertone and make it more ‘human,’ despite the fact that there is no need to dehumanize it. Moreover, Baldick (1990, 45) argues that “the decision to give the monster an articulate voice is Mary Shelley's most important subversion of the category of monstrosity.” By giving the creature a voice, the readers can more easily connect with it and see its true colours, while in most of the movie adaptations the creature is represented as a violent mute who cannot form a sentence, but simply grunts and produces incoherent sounds. By portraying it as a character who cannot even express its opinions, movie adaptations further alienate it from society, as he is essentially a scary, large creature who terrifies people by its sheer appearance. The creature is human; it is just not seen as a member of society because it differentiates itself from others, solely on physical characteristics.

#### 4. THE OTHER AND THE UNKNOWN

The idea that we should fear something because it is different from us is normal and present in all of us. It is natural to be scared in unfamiliar surroundings and situations, but we should not project this when interacting with other people. Today, this idea may be taken less seriously as at the time when Shelley was writing the novel. The late 1700s

and early 1800s were the prime time of the European colonization of the world. When coming into contact with the natives of the newly discovered lands, Europeans often saw their way of living as barbaric, primitive and very backward compared to the European lifestyle, which resulted in the feeling that the European culture was more advanced than others. Following that, the concept of 'otherness' appeared in order to express the notion of an entity that is different from your own identity and often seen as less worthy. In the novel, the concept can be most applied to the creature, which not only differentiates itself due to its ghastly physique, but also because of its unnatural creation. It is "a species unto himself, an impossible system of one term, he can have meaning for us but can achieve no self-distinction" (Lew 1991, 274). To remove that self-distinction, the creature wants Victor to create a female companion for it so it could feel loved and also to procreate. According to Hogle (1980, 41), the concept of 'otherness' in the novel is connected with Freud's *Unheimlich*:

First he is created in a "primal scene" of multiple repetitions that exposes its ground as fragments of death at every turn. After that, he differs from people as they are thought to be while resembling them as products of a symbolic order, and so is held at a distance by acts of repression and names that are not specific. (...) He beckons his observers and himself, in fact, toward the prospect they most fear: a vision of man effaced by his own fabrications and forced to accept continual displacement, a Nietzschean energy of repetition that kills, as the only basis of a selfhood that will never be fully.

The notion of otherness is the underlying motif that spurred the creature on its rampage to harm Victor by killing everybody he loved, because Victor never fulfilled his promise of creating a suitable female companion for the creature, which would remove the stigma of loneliness and depression that surrounded the creature's life. By refusing to create a female companion for the creature, Victor essentially sealed his own fate as that was the breaking point for the creature. Not having someone with whom the creature could connect on a deeper, emotional level is the main problem according to Lew (1991, 272) who claims that "the creature has no Other, no one to define 'it' self against or to rival." By being left alone in the world, the creature starts to resent other people, especially Victor, which later turns into hatred that leads it to act on its evil plan of killing everybody Victor loves.

Closely linked with the concept of otherness is also the concept of orientalism, which is also present in the novel in many ways, but one of them is connected to the creature. Its yellow skin and dark hair, alongside its huge physique, can be connected to the Bengali people as Lew (1991)

notes, but precisely because of its physical characteristics the creature is not accepted in the society. According to Malchow (1993), the creature is the embodiment of the way negroes were represented at the time Shelley was writing the novel, as strong, able to survive very harsh environments on little food, and possessing great strength and inherent rage and hate. At the time when the novel was being written, the colonized lands and their people were seen as less worthy than Europeans and this translates into the novel as well. By describing the creature in a way that can connect it with the colonized nations instead of the colonizers, Mary Shelley was further alienating the creature as the colonizers used to dictate the norm and rules of the society.

## 5. THE FOREIGN AND THE MEDIA

The notion of otherness can be applied even today, over 200 years after the time of the action in the novel, but in a different way. People still have prejudices towards foreigners, especially because they bring with them their own culture and many of them refuse to assimilate into the customs of the new country. The sense of belonging to their 'old' community is the reason many migrants refuse to abandon their cultural beliefs, but because of that, the sense of differentiation between migrants and native people deepens even more. However, migrants experience exactly the same problem as the creature in the novel, they simply stand out either because of their physical appearance or their cultural or religious beliefs. They, like Frankenstein, seek to be accepted into society but they are often met with distrust, fear and hate. It is not only their beliefs or physical appearance that make it harder for them to be accepted, but also the way they are often portrayed in mass media or pop culture. In many movie adaptations, Frankenstein was portrayed as a big, scary character, but one who had a kind heart and genuinely tried to help people. The very opposite portrayal is often attached to migrants today as mass media tends to portray them as aggressive and violent, often showing pictures of them destroying or burning buildings and reporting on the crimes they committed. This was evident during the European migrant crisis in 2015 and 2016. According to a report done by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees regarding the press coverage of the refugee and migrant crisis, only few articles focused on the cultural or economic benefits that asylum seekers and migrants could bring to host countries. Also, the report concluded that there were very few articles that focused on the push factors which forced the migration flows such as wars, human rights abuses or economic inequality. This is not surprising since the traditional media often cast as an issue of national security, preserving law and order etc. (Suro 2011). By focusing only on the negative aspects of the crisis, the notion of monstrosity that was



associated with Frankenstein is now ascribed to migrants. Many media outlets focused on showcasing the destruction often left behind by the migrants, but did not report on the reasons behind their leaving their home country and deciding to embark on a dangerous and, unfortunately for some of them, deadly path. It is important to note that this kind of selective reporting has serious drawbacks as it sets a trend in today's popular culture, a trend of portraying migrants in movies and series often in roles that include some criminal activity. This is very important because today media has a massive impact on public opinions and this kind of selective reporting sets a dangerous precedent for future reporting on such issues. Unlike the creature in *Frankenstein*, which has a voice in order to subvert its monstrosity and to give it a more human note, migrants are often not given the same opportunity. The Opportunity Agenda, a non-profit social justice communication lab, analysed storylines that dealt with immigration in popular television programs from 2014 to 2016 and in its 2017 report revealed the findings that 50% of Latino immigrant characters, 33% of all black immigrants and a quarter of Middle-Eastern immigrants were represented committing an unlawful act. The report also found that, overall, storylines about unlawful activities made up 25% of storylines involving immigrant characters. Some steps have been taken to correct this injustice such as the *Media Reference Guide* developed by *Define American*, a non-profit media and culture organization, with the purpose to "increase accurate representation of immigrants on screen as well as help foster more humanizing narratives in entertainment media overall" (Define American, 2017). When reporting on issues related to migrants, other studies argue that "the newspapers give more space and direct quotations to an in-group member, while citations to out-group members are given only when they are (or can be represented as being) inarticulate, extremist, illogical or threatening" (KhosraviNik 2010, 23). This is also what happens in *Frankenstein*, as Victor cannot comprehend the reasoning behind the creature's violent and destructive path because he does not place himself in its mindset and does not try to understand its motives. The very same process is happening today – society focuses on the negative aspects of the migrant crisis, which are fed to us by the media without considering what could have motivated so many people to decide to travel such great distances.

This is very important as media today has a big impact on whether something, or in this case someone, will be accepted or if it will be seen as a threat to society. Portraying the migrants in a negative light where the focus is set on the violence, destruction etc. brings on about the same perpetual circle of discrimination mentioned in relation to lower classes of society earlier in the text. By equating the migrants as a whole with few instances of violence that a small group committed, we are projecting our fears onto the whole, rather than on individuals. However, unlike at the

time when the novel is set, today people should strive for equality and not treat people differently because of their cultural differences. If we continue to ostracize one group from the rest of the people, we are essentially creating a potentially violent situation where we continue to focus on discrepancies, instead of what connects us. It is those differences that enrich us as people and show us that we should not judge somebody simply because they are different from us, but that we should see those differences as a way of improving ourselves, and society in general.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Shelley's portrayal of the creature has its roots in the new kind of man that was born in the French Revolution. Even though people could advance on the social ladder as a result of that, some prejudices were still present that obstructed it, which can be seen in the novel where the creature is unable to gain access into the middle-class society mainly because of its appearance. This prejudice towards people based on differences in appearances, cultural beliefs etc. has its modern-day equivalent in the relationship between native people and foreigners who are often treated the same way as Frankenstein, looked upon with distrust, hate and seen as less worthy. This became evident with the influx of migrants to Europe during 2015 and 2016 when the media focused on the negative aspects of the crisis. The portrayal of migrants as criminals continues today as studies show that they tend to be portrayed in popular culture and media committing unlawful acts. This creates a potentially violent situation that might erupt any second, and in a way change the fabric of society and the way of living to which we are accustomed since media and popular culture have a big impact on public opinion. Writing her novel, Shelley unconsciously touched upon a subject relevant for everybody, but often overlooked today. In a way, she managed to write about a topic that has not changed in the 200 years since the publication of the novel and probably will not change in the near future.

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