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Frankenstein Meets Lacan: Desire and Discourse in Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein"

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Who You Calling a Monster?:  
Cleaning Lacan’s Mirror so to Better Read Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein 
or

Even Monsters Need Love: Eros and the Symbolic Order in Mary Shelly’s Frankenstein 
or

The Dæmon, the Other, the Shadow: Faces of the Creature in Mary Shelly’s Frankenstein 
or

Frankenstein Meets Lacan: Desire and Discourse in Mary Shelly’s Frankenstein

—“Alas, we know not what we do when we speak words” —Percy Bysee Shelley

—“Human nature was originally one and we were whole, and the desire and pursuit of the whole  
is called love” —Plato The Symposium

—“If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously  
committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us  
and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every  
human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”—Alexander  
Solzhenitsyn

—“How could there be so much evil in this world?”  
“Knowing humanity, I wonder why there is not more” —Woody Allen

—“This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine” —William Shakespeare

—“If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise” —William Blake

We’ve has some wonderful interdisciplinary insights into Mary Shelly’s Frankenstein  
during this symposium. Tonight, I would like to look specifically at the creature himself and  
into the predicament of the creature, by analyzing three manifestations of the creature: the
creature as dæmon, the creature as the Other, and the creature as the Shadow. Each of these perspectives overlaps onto the others, and in each instance, language and the lack of fulfillment of desire function as the medium through which the creature becomes a monster.

Throughout the novel, Shelley never has Victor Frankenstein give the creature a name or refer to him by name. Never once is the creature recognized by anyone as an unique entity deserving of a proper noun; never once is he initiated into the circle of humanity by being addressed in the manner of respect which a name would indicate. Teresa Brennan, in her book *History After Lacan*, discusses the significance of Jacques Lacan’s reworking of the Hegelian dialectic in so far as it relates to the signifier and naming. She writes:

> the imaginary process of fixing the other is not only confined to *seeing*; it also involves naming. More accurately, naming is part of how the other is seen . . . .

In sum, when the master [read Victor Frankenstein] becomes the master, identified with and as a namer-shaper, released into and through cultural linguistic tradition, the master simultaneously directs aggression towards the one who is seen to be the passified [read the creature]. But this leaves the passified in a position where they are dependent (at the level of the ego) on the image they receive from the other (qtd. in Seshadri-Crooks 5)

Brennan goes on to say that the objectification of the other is in support of one’s own narcissistic fantasy. Language, in this schema, is engaged in the service of the ego and the fantasy of self-containment. In other words, we *believe* in the “factual” difference of the other in order to *see difference* as such (5). As the Shapir-Whorf theory of language suggests, we do not *say* what we *see*; rather, we *see* what we *say* (Pyles and Algeo 21, 239).
Thus the act of Victor’s never naming the creature is part of his attempt to refuse see the creature with any humanity and to see the creature as the other. Throughout the novel, the creature is referred to by a number of specific and sometimes peculiar nouns, including—“creature,” “monster,” “daemon,” “murder,” “wretch,” “fiend,” “devil,” and less frequently “being.” Of all the titles which Victor Frankenstein uses to refer to the creature, “daemon” is the least expected. The word “daemon” comes from the Latinate transliteration of the Greek daimón. Historically (from the OED) the word was first used in Plato’s Symposium (202d) referring to er_s or love. In Plato’s Apology, Socrates uses the word to refer to the spirit that warns him against doing wrong. In ancient Greek mythology the daemon was a supernatural being of a nature immediately between that of gods and men; an inferior divinity; a spirit or genius (including the souls of ghosts or deceased people, especially heros). Subordinate daemons were supposed to be emanations and derivatives from their chief deity. In Homer there is scarcely any distinction between gods and daemons. Socrates claimed to be guided by his daemon—that is, by his personal divine principle or agency, his inward monitor or oracle. Socrates believed that we each had our own daemon who would guide our moral choices and who had to be reckoned with—the daemon was one’s individually won attendant, ministering spirit, or genius.

The Christians’ application of the word became known as a “demon” or bad genius, and applied to the idols or gods of the heathen, and to the “evil” or “unclean spirits” by which demoniacs were possessed or actuated. We can understand how this might happen—if everyone in the Christian community were adhering to his or her own daemon/genius, the organized religion would lose power over the people. The individual’s genius became “dangerous” and
“evil” thus reinforcing that the only reliable source to guide one in determining moral action be the hierarchy of the church. By the time of the Vulgate and Wyclif bibles, the word “demon” was always taken for the Devil, and was applied to the tempter or to a person possessed of such a spirit.

Now, the word “daemon” is commonly understood to be a synonym for “demon” or “devil,” applying to a person of malignant, cruel, terrible, or destructive nature or hideous appearance. Rolo May gives us further insight into the word “devil” which comes from the Greek word diabolos; “diabolic” is the term in contemporary English. Diabolos, interestingly enough, literally means “to tear apart” (dia-bollein). Now it is fascinating to note that this diabolic is the antonym of “symbolic.” The latter comes from sym-bollein, which means “to throw together,” to unite. There lie in these words tremendous implications with respect to an ontology of good and evil. The symbolic is that which draws together [remember this when we later refer to Lacan’s theories and his use of the “symbolic order”], ties, integrates the individual in himself and with his group; the diabolic, in contrast, is that which disintegrates and tears apart. Both of these are present in the daimonic. (qtd. in Diamond 184)

I go to such lengths to give the etymology of the words “daemon” and “devil,” well, because I love the history of words, but in terms of this paper, I give the history because I believe that understanding the origin of the words, and reading the words in all of their meanings adds a depth to the reading of Frankenstein. If we use the contemporary meaning of daemon/demon—a hideous looking, evil, and cruel entity, we see the creatures as an evil
monster. But with the ancient meaning of the word, the creature can become Victor Frankenstein’s genius—Frankenstein’s spirit that he must reckon with and that will guide him in moral behavior. I believe that we have every reason to read the word dæmon as such because Shelley used the two words—dæmon and demon—indicating that words are not synonyms. With such a reading, the creature is not initially evil, but becomes evil due to Victor’s evil treatment of him. Victor himself acts immorally by not assuming responsibility for his creation, and his lack of responsibility exposes the unwitting creature to the harsh realities of humanity, leaving him only able to respond in kind to the repulsion and hatred he meets.

Naming (or the lack thereof) is not the only major importance of the role of language in the novel. After the creature leaves the laboratory where Victor brought him to life, barely existing in the harsh environment of the forest, he comes upon a humble cottage and is immediately drawn to the cottagers’ tenderness and love which they demonstrate to one another. When he first sees the De Lacey family, the creature voyeuristically watches them. He relates of the young woman, “the fair creature [sobbing] . . . knelt at [the blind father’s] feet. He raised her, and smiled with such kindness and affection, that I felt sensations of pain and pleasure, such as I had never before experienced, either from hunger or cold, warmth or food; and I withdrew from the window, unable to bear there emotions” (Shelley 72). Critic Ellen Herson Wittmann considers this “mixture of pain and pleasure” [wouldn’t Freud just love this?] as a “meeting of opposites that constitutes the moral acme in the novel . . .” (93). Wittmann suggests that “the metaphor for the specular realm, with the creature’s [corresponding] withdrawal represents a moral awakening, an awakening that is followed by the creature’s acquisition of language” [italics mine] (94). Wittmann goes on to note that “True er_s [remember here how the word
“daemon” first was a synonym for er_s] . . . is experienced by the intense emotional strain, a sense of mixed contraries . . . [T]he creature [then] is the embodiment of an er_s that is denied access to all the it would seek, that cannot move freely, as it is wont to do, among people and between realms, except at night and in remote and frozen regions, where it is destined to destroy itself” (Wittmann 97). Neither er_s nor the virtuous soul can survive in isolation, which constitutes division against itself.” (Wittmann 97). Intuitively enough (I’m assuming it was intuition, since Shelly had no access to poststructural thought), Shelley has the first task which the monster gives himself that of learning language. The creature’s response to this moment of moral awareness of his exclusion from the family of humanity, compels him to learn language, thinking that if he can express his virtuous thoughts to others, people will overlook his appearance, and return his affection.

Let’s shift now, for a bit, and look at some of Jacques Lacan’s ideas on language to better understand what happens to the creature as he enters language. For Lacan, neither the human unconscious nor human sexuality is a pre-given fact; rather, humans are constructed. Lacan reorients psychoanalysis to the task of understanding the ways and means in which our identities are constructed, through language. Language does not reside within an individual—the individual resides in language. “. . . language exists and its structure exists prior to the moment at which each subject at a certain point in his mental development makes his entry into it [language]” (Lacan, “The Agency” 1046). Only within the terms of language is the human subject constructed. Language waits for the neonate. It is through the speech of others that one’s identity is constructed:
Lacan posits the “desire” is an effect of language and the unconscious which is constituted upon the subject’s entry into the Symbolic Order. The Symbolic Order is the order of language and culture. Prior to the organization of the drives, the subject exists within the order of the Real, a realm which is incapable of representation or conceptualization and where there is no split between self and world. However, progression into the Symbolic order splits the subject from the primal object. This leads to the emergence of desire and the split subject experiences a constant lack which it desires to fill. . . [D]esire is desire for “the Other.” The Other is not a person but, as Lacan puts it, “the locus of the signifier.” The Other [is], therefore, . . . equated with discourse and the Symbolic order. (Pallos 1)

As Peter Brooks has noted, Frankenstein’s monster learns language in an attempt to enter ‘the symbolic order,’ or the ‘cultural system’ into which individual subjects are inserted and escape his ‘monsterism’: only in a symbolic order may he realize his desire for recognition” (qtd. in Brewer 154).

In observing the cottagers conversing among themselves, the creature learns that relationships have a language basis: “By degrees I made a discovery of still greater moment. I found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds. I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers. This was indeed a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it” (Shelley 74-5). The creature discovers the names of most familiar objects, and he spends the winter learning
language through observation and practice. “I formed in my imagination a thousand pictures of 
presenting myself to them, and their reception of me. I imagined that they would be disgusted, 
until, by my gentle demeanor and conciliating words, I should first win their favor, and 
afterwards their love. These thoughts exhilarated me, and led me to apply with fresh ardor to the 
acquiring the art of language” (Shelley 77).

Later, in the woods, the creature finds a large traveling bag containing some clothing and 
some books. Of the books, *Paradise Lost*, a volume of *Plutarch’s Lives* and the *Sorrows of 
Werter*, he says,

> I can hardly describe to you the effect of these books. They produced in me an 
> infinity of new images and feelings, that sometimes raised me to ecstasy, but 
> more frequently sunk me into the lowest dejection. . . . As I read, however, I 
> applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself 
> similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike the beings concerning whom I read, 
> and to whose conversation I was a listener. I sympathized with, and partly 
> understood them, but I was unformed in mind. I was dependent on none and 
> related to none. . . . My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: what did 
> this mean? Who was I? What was I? (Shelley 85-6)

For Lacan, identity is created through a “fissure,” through a radical split. When a baby 
learns to say “I” it acquires the designation from someone else. Thus the identity which seems to 
be that of the subject, in fact is a mirror image given to the individual when it identifies with 
others’ perceptions. Thus the self is necessarily created within a split—“a being that can only 
conceptualize itself when it is mirrored back to itself from the position of another’s desire”
The mirror image of the self appears to be a smooth totality—but such an understanding is a myth. For Lacan, the “image in which we first recognize ourselves is a misrecognition” (Rose 30). The mirror image becomes the model of the ego. “Identity shifts, and language speaks the loss which lay behind the first moment of symbolization” (Rose 32). We see the creature experience Lacan’s radical sift in his first experience of viewing himself:

I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers—their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions: but how was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity. (Shelley 76)

When the creature gathers all his courage, and when the other cottagers are out, he enters the cottage to speak with the old blind man. At first things seem to be going well, with the two conversing about the creature’s condition and De Lacey telling him that because of the good will of men, the creature should not despair. When the rest of the family returns unexpectedly, they scream in horror at the sight of the creature, and assuming that he intends harm upon their father, Felix beats the creature with a stick, chasing him away. The creature can only recognize his isolated self in terms of his loss as he cries:

All, save I, were at rest or in enjoyment; I, like the arch fiend, bore a hell within me [see Milton’s *Paradise Lost*]; and, finding myself unsympathized with, wished to tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction around me, and then to have sat
down and enjoyed the ruin. . . . For the first time the feelings of revenge and hatred filled my bosom, and I did not strive to control them; but, allowing myself to be borne away by the stream, I bent my mind toward injury and death. (Shelley 92).

Later, the creature tells Victor:

God in pity made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid from its very resemblance. . . . Increase of knowledge only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast I was. I cherished hope, it is true; but it vanished, when I beheld my person reflected in water, or my shadow in the moon-shine, even as that frail image and that inconstant shade. . . . [S]ometimes I allowed my thoughts, unchecked by reason, to ramble in the fields of Paradise, and dared to fancy amiable and lovely creatures sympathizing with my feelings and cheering my gloom; their angelic countenances breathed smiles of consolation. But it was all a dream. . . . (Shelley 88)

Again, in this instance, as well as in others, the creature only understand himself as a monster in relationship to the Other and through the mirror reflection he receives of himself through others. The creature’s awareness of himself is the awareness of loss. “Pain, and the lack of satisfaction are the triggers that evoke desire” (Mitchell 25). For Lacan, desire is always full of loss, and any satisfaction will contain that loss. “Desire persists as an effect of a primordial absence and it therefore indicates that . . . there is something fundamentally impossible about satisfaction. (Mitchell 6) Thus to be human [and to be creature] is to be continually experiencing
a decentering and a division—and identity is created in this division. What the creature really desires is to be included in the circle of humanity, and he is all too aware of the impossibility of his desire ever being fulfilled.

At the same time “identity and “wholeness” remain precisely at the level of fantasy. Subjects in language persist in their belief that somewhere there is a point of certainty, of knowledge and of truth. When the subject addresses its demand outside itself to another, this other becomes the fantasied place of just such a knowledge or certainty. . . . The Other appears to hold the “truth” of the subject and the power to make good its loss. (Rose 32)

Ultimately the subject must recognize that “there is desire, or lack in the place of the Other, that there is no ultimate certainty or truth. . . ” (Rose 40). Lacan sees the attempt to recover the loss as occurring through and in language. Words are the things itself—not some objective reality which exists outside or beyond language. Words, and the reality they represent are the primary human reality.

The “signifier” is the mechanism which transfers this meaning onto the thing itself. The relationship of representation is reversed [from Freud’s]; things become the screen for the self-articulation of the subject in relation to the Other. The ‘thingness’—character of the world is embedded into a double dialectic: that of the subject and the Other. . . Through the word, which is already a presence made of absence, absence itself comes to be named” (Braungardt 8)

Again, the “presence of an absence” translates into a dynamic which Lacan calls “desire.” Thus, the ego is formed by what it lacks. In this view, human speech is always saturated with desire.
According to Lacan’s mirror devise, it is in the place of the Other where naming and identification take place. As the creature’s mirror always reflects his horrific self (as articulated by others), the creature believes himself to be an alienated monster.

In the state of alienation, the ego is not only disidentified from the Self, which is desirable, but it is also disconnected from it, which is most undesirable. The connection between the ego and Self is vitally important to psychic health. It gives foundation, structure, and security to the ego and provides energy, interest, meaning and purpose. When the connection is broken the result is emptiness, despair, meaninglessness and in extreme cases psychosis or suicide. (Edinger 42-3). We see a manifestation of this when the creature attempts to explain to Victor why he, the creature, is so malicious:

I am malicious because I am miserable: am I not shunned and hated by all mankind? You, my creator, would tear me to pieces, and triumph; remember that, and tell me why I should pity man more than he pities me? You would not call it murder, if you could precipitate me into one of those ice-rifts, and destroy my frame, the work of your own hands. Shall I respect man when he contemns me? Let him live with me in the interchange of kindness, and, instead of injury, I would bestow every benefit upon him with tears of gratitude at his acceptance. But that cannot be; the human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union. Yet mine shall not be the submission of abject slavery. I will revenge my injuries: if I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear; and chiefly towards you my arch-enemy (Shelley 98)
Ultimately, the creature fulfills his threat and fulfills the mirror image he has received from others, killing almost everyone dear to Victor. The creature himself is mortified by his actions and sees only one way to save himself. Recognizing that the family of man will not allow his presence, the creature, demonstrating a remarkable understanding of his own identity, petitions Victor to create a mate for him, promising that with a mate, he can leave man’s society and find fulfillment in isolation with his mate:

> If I have no ties and affections, hatred and vice must be my position; the love of another will destroy the cause of my crimes, and I shall become a thing, of whose existence every one will be ignorant. My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor; and my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal. I shall feel the affections of a sensitive being, and become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which I am now excluded. (Shelley 100) [And elsewhere] We may not part until you have promised to comply with my requisition. I am alone and miserable; man will not associate with me; but one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me. My companion must be of the same species, and have the same defects. This being you must create. (Shelley 97)

At first, Victor agrees to carry out the creature’s request, but thinking better of his charge, he tears apart the mate in the middle of his creation of her, the monster vows revenge and kills Victor’s new bride, Elizabeth—which he eventually does. When the creature murders, he is, in a certain way, attempting to destroy the mirror which reflects his horrific image. The evil of the
creature can be understood as a manifestation of what Carl Jung calls “the shadow” (which can also help us to understand the psychological origin of men’s violence towards each other).

As Jung states:

Unfortunately there is no doubt about the fact that man is, as a whole, less good than he imagines himself or wants to be. Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is. . . .

When the shadow is projected, it may be carried by an individual [in this case the creature] or by a whole group of like individuals. The shadow is often experienced in terms of negative value judgments accompanied by strong negative emotions. The shadow is almost always identified from the perspective of how one would not like to be seen either by oneself or others, that is, as “not-I” (Pedersen 169).

For Jung, acknowledgment of the shadow is an important part of the individuation process; it is a means of reaching into deeper and often less accessible levels of the psyche, where the anima, as mediator of the creative unconscious can be met. (Pedersen 178)

The shadow, although by definition a negative figure, sometimes has certain clearly discernable traits and associations which point to quite a different background. It is as though he were hiding meaningful contents under an unprepossessing exterior. . . . In the case of the individual, the problem constellated by the shadow is answered on the plane of the anima, that is through relatedness [italics added]. (qtd. in Pedersen 178)
In this view, Victor’s only chance for salvation (for both himself and those he loves) is to claim responsibility for the creature (his own creation and an extension of himself). If at the beginning of the monster’s killing spree, Victor had let others know of his creation, the community could have helped him to capture and control the creature. But because Victor believes self-preservation lies in keeping the reality of the creature a secret, the creature is able to wreck his havoc without any restraints.

Ultimately, Victor dies in his hollow attempt to catch the monster, relaying the narrative of the creature on his death bed to the (also overly ambitious) Robert Walton, the captain of the ship which is frozen in the arctic waters, in an attempt to place the burden of destroying the creature on Robert, “This is the being whom I accuse, and for whose detection and punishment I call upon you to exert your whole power. It is your duty [interesting to hear Victor tell another of one’s duty] as a magistrate, and I believe and hope that your feelings as a man will not revolt from the execution of those functions on this occasion” (Shelley 138). We know that Walton does not destroy the creature, but the creature tells Walton of his plans to build his own funeral pier and destroy himself.

The critic William Veeder reads the ending of *Frankenstein* in a metaphorical fashion, stating,

> We cannot destroy the monster in any way. Eros is a force coeval with mankind, so the issue is not its death but its repression. The fire which the monster prophesies is the fire next time. He will endure until the apocalypse because Erotic anguish endures till then. Eros abides out there in its own darkness, and we can either repress it until it explodes in murderous and finally impotent
frustration or we can seek that self-knowledge which is the precondition of self-integration, and heroism. (Veeder 214)

If we read the creature as our collective projection of the other, or as the shadow of our own humanity, we recognize the contemporary necessity of giving the creature a name and of attempting to reunite with the Other we have created. As psychotherapist Anthony Stevens says, “The task of confronting the brutal, destructive elements of the Shadow has become in the twentieth century [as we can certainly say of the twenty-first century] the inescapable destiny of our species; if we fail we cannot hope to survive. With good cause this has become our ‘universal anxiety’.” (28). In this respect, Mary Shelley’s novel is perhaps even more relevant now than ever.


Pallos, Tamara. “Function of the Other in the Dialectic of Desire”


