

Rachel

Sister Grover

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### Releasing the Monster Inside

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* at the age of twenty, making a name for herself as one of the greatest writers in British Romantic literary history. Her novel continues to influence science fiction novels and thrillers today. Through Dr. Frankenstein, Shelley undertook an examination of man's basic reactions and the humanistic ability to cope with emotions. Frankenstein's preoccupation with death causes him to sublimate his fears, which ultimately leads to his downfall. Sublimation is a term used to identify certain defense mechanisms within the human mind. This psychological, subconscious process reveals much about the way humans deal with confusing trials and conflicting emotions Shelley's usage of characterization and incredible employment of imagery was the vehicle for this theory. .

Death is a common theme throughout *Frankenstein*, continually reshaping both the plot and the characters. Interestingly enough, Victor Frankenstein was never exposed to death or depression during his childhood years. He states, "In my education my father had taken the greatest precautions that my mind should be impressed with no supernatural horrors" (Shelly 37). As a boy, he developed a fascination with science and ancient stories of an elixir of life that had the ability to avert death. Since many psychologists believe that human reactions are based upon previous influences, this strange obsession became a motivation for his future choices. Reaching adulthood, he had his first personal encounter with death. His mother passed away after a battle with scarlet fever. He recalled, "My mother was dead, but we still had duties which we ought to

perform” (Shelley 28). As a man, he was expected to control and ignore his feelings of sadness and melancholy attitude, since these emotions were considered feminine and unbecoming for a man. Due to these pressures from the time period, Frankenstein was given very little time to grieve and was quickly ushered off to school, making it impossible for him to fully comprehend death and its meaning. It is possible that this forced emotional control caused mental repression. Repression is a term implemented by Sigmund Freud, a distinguished psychologist, to explain the “mental process by which distressing thoughts, memories, or impulses that may give rise to anxiety are excluded from consciousness and left to operate in the unconscious” (“Repression” def. 2a). Frankenstein claimed to believe that grief itself was merely an “indulgence” (Shelley 28), in order to explaining to himself why he was given this inadequate time.

From this point on, Victor Frankenstein became dominated by his subconscious; because he was not able to process his interaction with death, his mind became preoccupied with his desire to understand it. His classes only fed into this as he “was led to examine the progress of this decay, and forced to spend days and nights in vaults and charnel houses” (Shelley 37). Shelley paints a picture of the disgusting and decomposing world in which he now lives, collecting bones and sleeping in morgues. Looking past the text itself to Shelley’s characterization of Frankenstein, there is a clear change in his attitude. His ignorance of everything in the world around him suggests complete absorption into an exploration of death. His mind reveals the depth of his fascination completely when he falls asleep the night of his creation. Frankenstein remembers, “As I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death...I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of her flannel” (Shelley 44). This violent dream of Elizabeth, whom he loves, suggests a deeply seeded fear that death

will destroy all that is important to him. Freud often stated his belief that our subconscious fears and desires are manifested in our dreams. In Shelley's view, uncontrolled fears can dominate our actions and decisions.

Frankenstein's fixation with morbidity was clearly unnatural. Nevertheless, he was able to recognize the inappropriateness of this behavior. As a psychological defense mechanism, he attempted to sublimate his fears. The actual meaning of Sublimation is, "The appreciation or creation of ideal beauty... rooted in primitive...urges that are transfigured in culturally elevating ways" ("Sigmund Freud"). Essentially, Frankenstein sought to channel his seemingly inappropriate tendencies into socially acceptable practices. While attempting to reenergize a deceased human body might not seem like an appropriate relief of psychological stresses, Frankenstein recalled that, "Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world" (Shelley 39-40). He was able to justify this action by claiming it as a scientific advancement – merely a fascinating extension of his studies. He hoped that this discovery would help to bring joy to the world by the illumination of death.

Frankenstein believed he could create life himself. An attempt to control life is a natural reaction to the helplessness of death. He reminisced, "I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse the spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet" (Shelley 43). However, because the body he pieced together was dead, there was no life – no soul – to restore to it. As Victor channeled his fears and strange desires into the creation of the monster, they were also channeled into the monster himself, thereby inserting a portion of his own soul into his creation. For the length of time leading up to the monster's awakening, they were one. He recalled, "I did not watch the blossom or expanding leaves – sights which before always yielded

me supreme delight – so deeply was I engrossed in my occupation,” (Shelley 42). He was mentally giving up so much of himself to his creation that he became sick every night, and later fell into a seizure. Through this, Shelley explains the mysterious process by which life is transferred from man to monster.

When the monster awoke, it became its own separate entity, a moving and breathing piece of the Doctor himself. He was an active corpse and a living personification of Frankenstein’s greatest fear – death. The fact that the monster was purposefully oversized, “about eight feet in height,” (Shelley 39), suggests the immensity of Frankenstein’s fear. It was clearly too large for him to handle and had to be removed from him. The monster became an extension of the Doctor, a tool for him to deal with his mental inadequacies. He confessed, “Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of my room, and continued a long time transversing in my bedchamber,” (Shelley 44). The fact that the monster symbolized the transference of his fears was solidified as Victor ran at the sight of him. Later, while visiting Justine, a friend who had been convicted of the monster’s crimes, he described, “I had retired to a corner of the prison room, where I could conceal the horrid anguish that possessed me,” (Shelley 81). In his cowardice, he could not even stand to see the effects that his mind would have on his loved ones, allowing the monster to become the stronger part of him.

Though the man and monster separated, they remained connected. The corpse became a vehicle through which the doctor reveals his greatest thoughts and deepest desires – an exploration of death. While the monster committed the physical crimes, Victor paid for them mentally with inconsolable grief and constant pangs of guilt. He realized, “I had turned loose into the world a depraved wretch, whose delight was in carnage and misery; had he not murdered my brother?” (Shelley 68). However, it is odd that his brother’s death came just as he was

growing out of his awkward, sickly years. William was becoming handsome and received much attention from Elizabeth, which Shelley used as a foreshadowing of coming events and a parallel for Victor's change. Subconsciously, it is possible that Victor might have felt jealousy towards his progressing brother, and might have wished his threatening presence removed. In this way, the monster becomes Frankenstein's "id." In Freud's psychoanalytical approach to the human mind, he felt that the id was the part of the brain that held all unconscious desires and urges. This was controlled by the ego, or the part of the brain that adapts to what is socially acceptable. While Victor's ego would never allow him to murder his own brother, his unfettered id, personified by an eight foot tall, reanimated corpse could easily accomplish the evil task.

Frankenstein becomes subjugated by his guilt as it carries out his darkest desires. He becomes the monster that he so feared, embracing death and its mysteries throughout the rest of the novel. He first succumbs to mental death and decay. He said, "When I thought of him, I gnashed my teeth, my eyes became enflamed, and I ardently wished to extinguish that life which I had so thoughtlessly bestowed" (Shelley 85). He is digressing to a primitive and animalistic form to express his emotions, not unlike the monster himself. Finally, after retelling the entire story, Frankenstein is able to embrace death in a fully physical form. Believing himself to be a pathetic addition to mankind, he woefully jumps from the narrator's ship and is "borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance," (Shelley 240). By suppressing, or holding back his natural curiosity towards death, Frankenstein was forced to surrender to his greatest fears.

Though frightening, the struggles of Frankenstein's character are not uncommon. Even today social restrictions often require the sublimation of unacceptable fascinations or beliefs in order to be accepted by the world. This can easily mean the repression of desires and emotions as well. While this presents a temporary solution, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley suggests that this is

not the appropriate way to handle these psychological issues. Her fantastic rendering of this struggle within the human mind insinuates that repression and sublimation will eventually cause damaging, mental side effects. Those secret desires caged in the mind will become the monster that will surely bring about our eventual destruction.

## Works Cited

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