

THE IDEA OF THE SELF IN FRANKENSTEIN

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Abstract

The paper sets out to establish that in Frankenstein the argument of the self centres around the logic of human companionship, self-assertiveness, transgressing human limits and a certain kind of bodily aesthetic. How the different characters in the text engage with the idea of the self is the central theme. This paper looks at the three main narratives of Walton, Victor and the Creature, comparing and contrasting these to the smaller narratives in the text.

Keywords: *Autobiography, self, narratives, angst of the other, bodily aesthetics*



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Introduction

In her article 'Autobiographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice', Laura Marcus discusses the form of autobiography and also looks at representation of self within literature. Quoting Olney she argues, "The 'whole' self apparently remains intact -- although the self in Olney's account is represented purely, and as pure, consciousness, untrammelled by either memory or body" (Marcus, 189). The idea of the self is seen as pure consciousness, not affected by memory or the discourse of the body. However, as we intend to prove, in *Frankenstein* the notion of the self, represented in the text (through the three central narratives and the smaller voices of some of the other characters) is structured around a certain idea of human companionship, self-assertiveness, transgressing human limits and a bodily aesthetic. It also demonstrates how the act of cognition translates into experiencing the self in different ways. The central discourse of the narrative of Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein and the Creature centres around a structure of feeling. The characters, as we will discuss through this paper, are

grappling with the desire for a stable sense of self. How they negotiate this engagement with the self is the central focus of this paper.

Walton's Letters

Frankenstein begins with letters of Robert Walton to his sister:

You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings. I arrived here yesterday, and my first task is to assure my dear sister of my welfare and increasing confidence in the success of my undertaking. I am already far north of London, and as I walk in the streets of Petersburg, I feel a cold northern breeze play upon my cheeks, which braces my nerves and fills me with delight. Do you understand this feeling? (Shelley, 7)

An analysis of the beginning of Walton's letter makes his sentiment amply evident. Despite the very deceptive "you will rejoice to hear" and "to assure my dear sister", the letter is more to declare to his sister the correctness of his enterprise as against her foolish feminine concerns regarding its success and her "evil foreboding". The rhetorical question at the end of the quoted passage, in no uncertain terms, pronounces his separation from and his superiority to Mrs. Saville.

Besides, Walton's letters express a strong desire to explore and to conquer the unknown. The negotiation between inner and outer spaces forms the core of his narrative. The outer world of the unexplored is expressed through the chronicle of the fragmented inner self: "My courage and my resolution is firm; but my hopes fluctuate, and my spirits are often depressed." (Shelley, 9)

Nature and spatial metaphors are significant for what they evoke in the subject. The movement to the operations of the psyche; the inner workings of the mind are crucial in the text. Walton shares his innermost feelings in the letter he writes to his sister. A desire for companionship and need for someone with a similar kind of sensibility informs the tenor of one of his letters. Such a friend, will not just encourage him in his desire for the unknown, but, by approving of his plans, provide an end to his solitude. The narrator wants a certain kind of intimacy, enabling him to understand the depths of his self. The language of sentiment in the letters exposes the desire of the subject to find some kind of totality – merging with the self of the other.

Victor's Chronicles

The second significant narrative in the text, that of Victor, is framed by Walton's narrative. Even though Victor's account is determined by warning Walton about the dangers of ambition, his narrative too is an exercise in self-aggrandizement.

I am by birth a Genevese, and my family is one of the most distinguished of that republic. My ancestors had been for many years counsellors and syndics, and my father had filled several public situations with honour and reputation. (Shelley, 19)

Again, a cursory look at the commencement of Victor's tale unequivocally tells the readers his distinction and his illustrious lineage. Sired by an honoured and a reputed public official and having ancestors who were counsellors and syndics in Geneva for several years, Victor belongs clearly to a very distinguished family. This superiority carries him aloof throughout the novel. And his condescending attitude is evident throughout.

Significantly, what is dominant all through his narrative is his preoccupation with his own self, and an intense desire to separate himself from the loathsome being he has created. In doing so, he is evading the realization that as his creation, the Creature is somewhere an extension of his own self.

The narrative of Victor's creation, centres around a kind of perverse bodily exertion: "I pursued nature to her hiding places. Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil, as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave, or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay?" (Shelley, 36)

The delight in his creation is impelled by ambition and a kind of self-glorification envisaging a moment where generations will thank him for what he has conceived, creation as an act of perfection; a bodily aesthetic of complete harmony impels his desire and purpose. The loathing he feels when he sees the creature is described in aesthetic terms. Victor's extreme passion is also determined by the truth of his own identity, his desire for a stable self as inextricably bound with the self of the other.

The narrative unleashes darker forces of cognition, Victor, despite himself (evading the sort of connectedness he feels with the being), is propelled forward by the narrative to a realization of the creature as his alter ego:

I consider the being whom I had cast among mankind, and endowed with the will and power to effect purposes of horror, such as the deed which he had now done, nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me. (Shelley, 56)

The connectedness with the Creature, despite his desire to assert his separateness, dominates the latter part of Victor's narrative.

Confessions of the Creature

The narrative of the Creature is the most fascinating of all. Lee Sterrenburg, in *Mary Shelley's Monster: Politics and Psyche in Frankenstein* points towards the ambiguity that surrounds the representation of the monster. However, the focus on the Creature centres around the narrative of the outsider, the character on the fringes; the damned criminal, described in terms of a loathsome physiognomy. The text, as we argued earlier, builds the narrative of moral perfectibility based on a certain idea of aesthetics/ physicality. The appearance of the Creature seems a window to his imperfect, immoral self, his eloquence merely a proof of his cunning and artifice. But as we set out to prove, the chronicle of the Creature is more complex than that. A close look at the opening words of the Creature in the novel, though reported by Victor, undoubtedly, suggests that this is yet another example of self-absorption.

"I expected this reception," said the daemon. "All men hate the wretched; how, then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things! Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us. You purpose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life? Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind. If you will comply with my conditions, I will leave them and you at peace; but if you refuse, I will glut the maw of death, until it be satiated with the blood of your remaining friends." (Shelley, 74-75)

His very opening remarks compliment the picture of the agile and sure-footed *monster* that Victor had just described. Though unlike the two preceding narrators in his predicament, the creature too is self-assertive just the way Walton and Victor are. He is extremely conscious of his needs and is even willing to threaten his creator with dire consequences if he fails him. This tenacity is also visible in the first words that Victor utters in the novel. "Before I come on board your vessel ... will you have the kindness to inform me whither you are bound?" (Shelley, 15) As Walton remarks this was completely unexpected of someone in Victor's predicament. Even when he is marooned and helpless, Victor is determined to pursue his vengeance. What is obvious is that the introduction of both Victor and his creation reveal their self-centeredness and self-assurance. What is fascinating is the backdrop of the introduction of all the three male characters' narratives too are similar. While the words of Walton are written from the icy regions of St. Peter's Burg, Victor narrates his tale on board Walton's ship surrounded by ice sheets and the creature relates his story to Victor on top of the icy mountain.

However, the beginning of the creature's narrative offers a completely different picture:

It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original era of my being; all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct. A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard, and smelt at the same time; and it was, indeed, a long time before I learned to distinguish between the operations of my various senses. By degrees, I remember, a stronger light pressed upon my nerves, so that I was obliged to shut my eyes. Darkness then came over me and troubled me, but hardly had I felt this when, by opening my eyes, as I now suppose, the light poured in upon me again. (Shelley, 77)

The creature relates his tale with him coming into consciousness. His narrative details his helplessness and the impressions his surroundings had on him and how those impressions led to his awakening. He also explains the way in which he understood who he was, how he was different, his failed attempts at co-habiting with humans and his revenge against his creator. However, Compared to Satan (*Frankenstein* constantly evokes Milton's *Paradise Lost*), the Creature is also driven by impulses similar to those that drive other people – a need for love, appreciation and human companionship:

“How can I move thee? Will no entreaties cause thee to turn a favourable eye upon thy creature, who implores thy goodness and compassion. Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent, my soul glowed with love and humanity: but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow creatures, who owe me nothing? they spurn and hate me. The desert mountains and dreary glaciers are my refuge. I have wandered here many days; the caves of ice, which I only do not fear, are a dwelling to me, and the only one which man does not grudge. These bleak skies I hail, for they are kinder to me than your fellow beings”. (Shelley, 75-76)

The Creature craves for human company, follows the mechanisms of Felix and his family, has this desire to be accepted by them. But the rage he feels when they reject him and are repulsed by him, gives us a glimpse into the character of the injured protagonist, like Satan, misunderstood and isolated from everything beautiful and good.

The other part of his narrative, focusses on the desire to learn in the Creature, the books he accidentally stumbles upon, *Paradise Lost* being the most interesting of them all, give rise to certain indescribable feelings in him:

“Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it, like a lichen on the rock. I wished sometimes to shake off all thought and feeling; but I learnt that there was but one means to overcome the sensation of pain, and that was death – a state which I feared yet did not understand. I admired virtue and good feelings, and love the gentle manners and amiable qualities of my cottagers; but I was shut out from intercourse with them, except through means which I obtained by stealth, when I was unseen and unknown, and which rather increased than satisfied the desire I had of becoming one among my fellows. The gentle words of Agatha, and the animated smiles of the charming Arabian, were not for me. The mild exhortations of the old man, and the lively conversation of the loved Felix, were not for me. Miserable, unhappy wretch!” (Shelley, 93)

The intellectual act of reading gives rise to certain thoughts, an insight into the self, a keenness of feeling –realization of his own separation from all that is beautiful and good. The
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philosophical questioning of his origins in –“What was I” (Shelley, 93) and the self-scrutiny we see in the latter part of the text, towards the end, when he curses himself as the destroyer of filial love and ties of friendship. He compares himself to the fallen angel, feeling remorse for his fiendish acts, but helpless in the face of rejection and hatred. The Creature keenly feels this act of injustice, a feeling of abandonment not just by Victor, his creator but also the cottagers whom he loved and admired. The logic of this alternate narrative sensitizes the reader to think about the trauma of the oppressed. The Creature, through his story highlights the angst of the other.

Embedded within the narrative of the creature are the well-known narratives of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* and Volney’s *Ruins of Empires* which in turn reiterate and uphold some of the underlying principles expressed in the three narratives. So is with the enlightenment ideas of Godwin and the mythical Promethean narrative with which the author consistently engages throughout the text. Walton’s and Victor’s challenge of nature and human limits and the creature’s challenge of his creator allude to these texts. The glory-seeking, the companion-seeking and the vengeful as well as maniacal characters in the novel again hark back to the above narratives.

The egocentric and maniacal narrators of *Frankenstein* also point to the hubris of the God-like romantic creator-artist and comment on the excesses of romantic creativity and imagination. The fact that all the narrators fall short of their ambition or glory and even end up victims of their own over-reaching ambition testify to this.

Other Narratives

In contrast to the self-exploring and self-projecting narratives of the three male characters of the novel which are the bedrock of *Frankenstein*, the embedded narratives in the novel through Elizabeth’s missives are unambiguously self-effacing and self-denying. Elizabeth’s letters in the novel provide a stark contrast to the trumpet-blowing narratives of the chief narrators – Walton, Victor and his creation – by shifting the focus from self to those around and related to her. Elizabeth’s first letter in the novel that begins:

My Dear cousin, “I cannot describe to you the uneasiness we have all felt concerning your health. We cannot help imagining that your friend Clerval conceals the extent of your disorder: for it is now several months since we have seen your hand-writing; and all this time you have been obliged to dictate your letters to Henry. Surely, Victor, you must have been exceedingly ill; and this

makes us all very wretched, as much so nearly as after the death of your dear mother. (Shelley, 44)

In spite of the possessive 'my' at the beginning of her letter, the opening sentences clearly reveal Elizabeth's apprehension regarding Victor's condition. The letter is replete with expressions of concern, anxiety, and anguish at the health of Victor; regret for not being with him as well as expectations and even a slight joy at the prospect of Victor's recovery as informed by Henry. On the other hand, the opening remarks of the male narrators in the novel, as we have already seen, centre around themselves.

Contrary to the extremely egoistic nature of these male characters, Elizabeth, Justine, and even to a certain extent, Felix present a completely different take on human existence and relationships. These characters are portrayed all through the novel as transforming themselves to an almost transparent media through which others see and understand their world. However, in the case of the three male narrative voices, what is highlighted is an urge to reflect their wishes and desperations on to others. An examination of Elizabeth's letter to Victor makes this point obvious:

Your father's health is now so vigorous, that he appears ten years younger since last winter. Ernest also is so much improved, that you would hardly know him: he is now nearly sixteen, and has lost that sickly appearance which he had some years ago; he is grown quite robust and active. (Shelley, 44)

"I must say also a few words to you, my dear cousin, of little darling William. I wish you could see him; he is very tall of his age, with sweet laughing blue eyes, dark eye-lashes, and curling hair. When he smiles, two little dimples appear on each cheek, which are rosy with health. He has already had one or two little wives, but Louisa Biron is his favourite, a pretty little girl of five years of age.

Now, dear Victor, I dare say you wish to be indulged in a little gossip concerning the good people of Geneva. The pretty Miss Mansfield has already received the

congratulatory visits on her approaching marriage with a young Englishman, John Melbourne, Esq. Her ugly sister, Manon, married M. Duvillard, the rich banker, last autumn. Your favourite schoolfellow, Louis Manoir, has suffered several misfortunes since the departure of Clerval from Geneva. But he has already recovered his spirits, and is reported to be on the point of marrying a very lively pretty Frenchwoman, Madame Tavernier. She is a widow, and much older than Manoir; but she is very much admired, and a favourite with every body.” (Shelley, 47)

It is as if Elizabeth is a transparent glass through which Victor watches Geneva from Ingolstadt. Elizabeth keeps herself and her yearnings (except for the speedy recovery of Victor) completely concealed and as is clear from her letter, her happiness lies in seeing happy and kind faces around her. It is as though Elizabeth has no ego at all. Compare this with the egotistic narrative voices of the novel!

Conclusion

As we have seen, the idea of the self as revealed in *Frankenstein* through the narrative voices of the above mentioned characters is determined variously. In the case of some, it is manifested as a longing for companionship and in others, it is expressed as over-reaching ambition, revenge, narcissism, the angst of the oppressed / the other and an emphasis on bodily aesthetics. These narratives also determine how the very manner of perceiving transforms the realization of self variedly. This nuanced way of looking at the notion of self enables us to significantly enhance our understanding of the characters and complicate our comprehension of the otherwise straightjacketed characters of the novel. Such an exercise is also significant as it helps free the reader from the many binaries like Protagonist – antagonist, Male – female, minor – major, flat – round, good – evil characters and lead her to a more nuanced and complete grasp of the text and its context.

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