

Discuss the power of the eye in *Frankenstein*

'When, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open'¹. This eye has had power over two centuries of readers: the power to captivate, terrify and repulse. Nevertheless, the monster's appearance, his 'yellow eye', is at most only half of Mary Shelley's concern. Just as important to notice in the above passage is Frankenstein's 'I saw'. It is the way in which other characters see the monster, the perceptive powers of their eyes, which create fascinating tensions in the novel. Shelley complicates the relationship between physical, moral and creative deformity by exploring and challenging instinctive reactions to what the eye sees.

In an article for the *Partisan Review*, Harold Bloom highlighted one of the great paradoxes of *Frankenstein* and incidentally identified the importance of the eye's judgement in this novel: 'this disaster either would not have happened, or would not have mattered anyway, if Frankenstein had been an esthetically successful maker'². Reactions to Frankenstein's monster's repulsive appearance are crucial to the development of the tragedy. Abandoned because his appearance repulses even his creator, the monster turns to the DeLaceys where, although he is half-accepted by blind Old DeLacey, again his appearance is too repulsive a barrier for those with sight to overcome. Finally, all his hopes rest with William Frankenstein: 'a beautiful child, who came running into the recess I had chosen, with all the sportiveness of infancy'³. This passage sets up the child as the monster's opposite. He is delicate, youthful and, most importantly, beautiful. He runs into the monster's territory just as prey would, but initially not as an opportunity for evil, rather as an image of hope. For the monster, the youthful mind represents something that has not been taught to associate physical deformity with repulsion. His mind might be educated with new connections so that beauty and deformity could exist side by side. Unfortunately this hope is wrong. Just as the adults did, the child finds the sight of the monster unbearable and immediately covers his eyes saying: 'monster! ugly wretch! you wish to eat me and tear me to pieces – You are an ogre'⁴. The child's rhetoric is telling of the monster's mistake. With his own knowledge stemming from Milton and Plutarch, he neglected to understand the simpler forms of infant education, and that from the very earliest age children are taught to associate fairytale villains with unusual appearances; moral corruption with physical deformity. When this last hope is destroyed, the monster is driven to his first murder. Ironically, this act means that the 'Frankenstein myth' now forms part of a child's associational education.

By placing all his hopes in William, the monster has made one further assumption. His theories about the child's reaction are based on empiricist psychology. Empiricism, particularly the works of Locke and Hume, believes that children are born as *tabula rasae*, or blank slates, and experience forms their beliefs and guides their behaviour. It is a psychological approach which works in the monster's favour, because it would follow that he himself was not born evil but was driven to it by his later experiences.

¹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 58.

² Harold Bloom, 'Frankenstein, or the new Prometheus', *Partisan Review*, vol. 32 1965, 611 – 618 p. 614.

³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 144.

⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 144.

Consequently, the most consistent alignment of Shelley's fiction with the theory is in the monster's narrative. It is not an approach, however, which is put forward unambiguously. Framed around this central narrative are Frankenstein's views which hint at an alternative approach that the monster was born bad and reactions to him are simply a visual recognition of this evil. Shelley brings the two approaches into tension when the monster meets with Old DeLacey. The monster is convinced that it is merely an aesthetic barrier that stands between him and the family; should he present a civilised mind, he might be accepted: 'which knowledge might enable me to make them overlook the deformity of my figure'⁵. Thus he introduces himself to the only character who does not have the complete power of the eye. Old DeLacey states:

I am blind and cannot judge your countenance, but there is something in your words which persuades me that you are sincere. I am poor and an exile, but it will afford me true pleasure to be in any way serviceable to a human creature⁶

Two aspects of this speech are important. Firstly, that without seeing the monster's physical deformity DeLacey believes he is a 'human creature'. There is nothing other than his appearance that warrants suspicion, let alone fear. Secondly, however, it must be noted that DeLacey labours his visual limitations. Because he opens his speech with a concession, he hints at the importance of the eye's power in making a moral judgement. Perhaps there is something in the power of the eye which is unmatched by any other sense.

Shelley goes further to complicate this scene by including the monster's own reaction to his appearance, the self-reflexive power of the eye, as a prelude to it. When preparing to meet the DeLaceys, the monster sees a reflection of himself: '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...'⁷ His initial reaction is just like other humans and he is repulsed instinctively by the deformed appearance. What he sees reflected, however, is not only his appearance, it is his identity. Moral and physical beings come together in an inescapable statement of identity where 'monster' is framed by the past and present forms of 'to be'. The inevitable third formation, 'the monster I will become', is implied ominously. Again, Shelley plays with cause and effect. Is he a monster because of his physical deformity, or does he become a monster once he defines himself by it?

An equally provoking question raised by this scene is why the monster is repulsed by his own image. Unlike William Frankenstein, he has not been brought up with fairytale associations of beauty with good and ugliness with evil, or, as he himself terms it, 'prejudiced'⁸ against physical deformity. There appears to be something more to the power of the eye which provokes universally different responses to deformity or beauty. Shelley goes to great length to describe how the monster acquires the power of the eye and follows Hartley and Locke's theories of progression from mere physical experience through sensory definition to practical understanding. Initially, his senses are entirely indistinct: 'a

⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 116.

⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 136.

⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 116.

⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 144.

strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard and smelt at the same time⁹, but gradually he is able to separate the power of the eye and eventually to refine his sight: 'my eyes became accustomed to the light and to perceive objects in their right forms; I distinguished the insect from the herbs and by degrees, one herb from another'¹⁰. Adherence to Hartley and Locke's theories suggests that the monster's acquisition of sight could be taken as an example of the process undertaken by any human. It is perhaps surprising then that Shelley says next to nothing about how initial perceptions turn into value judgements. Differentiating between inanimate herbs which are unlikely to provoke an emotional reaction is one thing, but by the time the monster meets the DeLaceys, he is able not only to see them but to judge that: 'it was a lovely sight, even to me, poor wretch! who had never beheld aught beautiful before'¹¹. It is as if beauty speaks for itself and perceptions of it do not need to be taught or learnt.

Interestingly, there are very few judgements of attractiveness beyond the overt distinction between the human form and monstrous deformity. Shelley rarely makes value judgements of relative beauty between humans. Instead, images of the human form are frequently contrasted with the monster and thus are all beautiful. This is particularly the case with the murdered victims who in death take on innocent, virtuous and perhaps idealised beauty in comparison with the barbarous action of murder. After William's death, the monster finds a portrait of the boy's mother: 'it was a portrait of a most lovely woman. In spite of my malignity, it softened and attracted me'¹². Deformity is set against beauty; serenity against aggression; human against monster. This juxtaposition is also an echo of an earlier vision from Frankenstein's narrative. In his delirious sleep after creating the monster, Frankenstein also sees his mother:

Delighted and surprised, I embraced [Elizabeth], but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and 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 fold of flannel¹³

The movement between Elizabeth's beautiful vivacity and the gruesome details of his mother's decay sets up a contrast between natural, human life and the monstrous creation Frankenstein has made from graveyard material. Shelley is careful to include details which are repulsive to the senses: 'the corpse', 'the grave worms crawling', so that aesthetic contrasts again throw morals into question. The vision is in fact a premonition of Elizabeth's eventual fate, the tragic consequence of the actions Frankenstein has just performed. And in the vision, Elizabeth's death is entirely his fault because she begins to change with that first fatal kiss. At this point in the novel, Frankenstein recognises almost unconsciously what Bloom would later pinpoint. The cause of the tragedy was not simply the monster's appearance, but his act of creation.

⁹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 105

¹⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 105.

¹¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 110.

¹² Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 144

¹³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 59

The monster overtly and angrily recognises the frustrating similarities and crucial differences between creator and creation: 'my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance'¹⁴. Frankenstein's defence is that because 'the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed, I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make the being of a gigantic stature'¹⁵. It is not necessarily scientific ability which is at fault here; instead it is his haste, single-minded ambition and underestimation of what the creature would become. From Shelley's point of view a monster was always going to be the result of Frankenstein's attempt at creation. In the 1831 Author's Introduction she states 'frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world'¹⁶. To Shelley's imaginative eye, the creation could only ever exist with a hideous appearance. So whilst 'God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good'¹⁷, Frankenstein makes a horror-struck bid to escape his creation.

The beauty and monstrosity which Shelley often sets up as polar opposites are at times remarkably similar. So much so that in another of Frankenstein's dreams, a vision of the monster's intensely provocative 'yellow eye' and his best friend's beautiful 'dark orbs'¹⁸ frequently interchange. When Josia Reichardt states that 'the essential condition for a monster is that the human characteristics it possesses must not be changed too far'¹⁹ she highlights something crucial in this similarity to the power of the eye. Because others can recognise what the monster is meant to be, they see him as a grotesque and frightening deformity rather than an entirely new creature. The fundamental difference between the two forms is how they were created.

A year after the first edition of *Frankenstein* was published, Percy Shelley wrote that 'life, the great miracle, we admire not because it is so miraculous',²⁰ as part of what would become his essay 'On Life'. In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley shows what happens when life is not a 'great miracle' but the product of human toil. The comparison which results between the physical and moral standards of the two creations reawakens the power of the reader's eye to appreciate the beauty of the 'miraculous' human form.

¹⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 133.

¹⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 54.

¹⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 8.

¹⁷ <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+1:31&version=KJV>.

¹⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 186.

¹⁹ Josia Reichardt, 'Artificial Life and The Myth of Frankenstein' in *Frankenstein, Creation and Monstrosity* ed. Stephen Bann, (London: Reaktion Books, 1994) 136 – 157, p. 139

²⁰ Percy Shelley, 'On Life' in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* ed. Donald H Reiman and Neil Fraistat, (New York: Norton, 2002) 505-508, p. 505.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Shelley, Percy, 'On Life' in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* ed. Donald H Reiman and Neil Fraistat, (New York: Norton, 2002) 505 – 508

Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, (London: Penguin Books, 2003)

King James Bible www.biblegateway.com

Secondary Sources

Bloom, Harold, 'Frankenstein, or the new Prometheus', *Partisan Review*, vol. 32 1965, 611 – 618

Drabble, Margaret ed, *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

Mellor, Anne K., *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, (New York: Routledge, 1988)

Miles, Robert, *Gothic Writing 1750 – 1820: A Genealogy*, (London: Routledge, 1993)

Reichardt, Josia, 'Artificial Life and The Myth of Frankenstein' in *Frankenstein, Creation and Monstrosity* ed. Stephen Bann, (London: Reaktion Books, 1994) 136 - 157