

The Fall of the Creature: Miltonic Influences in Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Since the release of one of the most well-known novels in Western literature, many scholars have tried to interpret the masterpiece that is *Frankenstein*. Some, for instance, look at it as a "birth myth," one highly influenced by Mary Shelley's own life. Anne K. Mellor looks at it in several ways, including through a feminist lens, as she notes that a fear of femininity helps lead to Victor Frankenstein's downfall. Most importantly, however, Mellor also discusses the fact that the Creature's sense of identity is ultimately limited. Although she does not specifically deal with *Paradise Lost*, many other scholars have picked up on the fact that it is the Creature's focus on Milton's epic which limits his own understanding of his being. Of the actual relationship between Shelley's and Milton's works, however, there has been much discussion. Critics such as Harold Bloom have essentially come to see *Frankenstein* as a Romantic retelling of *Paradise Lost*, whereas more recent scholarship has tended to side more towards Shelley's text criticizing Milton's. Mary Shelley both challenges and reinterprets Milton's *Paradise Lost* through a modern scientific context, as she presents Frankenstein's creature as a created being adjusting to a human world, navigating between the contradicting roles of Adam and Satan in his quest to discover his own identity.

Frankenstein and Paradise Lost

Although it is unclear how exactly one should interpret Mary Shelley's masterpiece, it is undeniable that Milton's popular epic had helped shape her writing. It is worth examining, therefore, just how much power *Paradise Lost* seemed to hold over *Frankenstein's* writer, and,

in turn, how the science fiction novel responds to the poem's influence. While it might be nearly impossible to determine all that was on Shelley's mind at the time she first started writing her horror story, one need only to look at the ways in which her characters respond to and embody those of Milton to see her devotion to her Miltonic studies. In fact, Mary Shelley had read many of her predecessor's works around the same time in which she was writing *Frankenstein*: "[I]n 1815, 1816, and 1817, she read the works of Milton: *Paradise Lost* (twice), *Paradise Regained*, *Comus*, *Areopagetica*, *Lycidas*" (Gilbert 51). Mary's dedication to her studies seem to suggest that she might have respected Milton a great deal, or at least she recognized the significance of his literary contributions, just as many other respectable writers of her time, including her husband, Percy, as well as Byron, Blake, and Wordsworth, did.

In terms of others' responses to *Paradise Lost* during the Romantic Period, many seemed to look to the text's assortment of characters as representatives of themselves. Mary Shelley plays off of this response in *Frankenstein*: "As an intertext *Paradise Lost* functions in the novel exactly as it did in nineteenth-century culture: as a literary repository of restrictive patterns of self-identification, so deified by tradition, as to have become, as the monster claims, a 'true history' of what we are" (Lamb 306). Through the characters of Adam, Eve, and Satan, Milton explores questions of identity and individuality, and it is mainly through their quests towards self-hood that readers of *Paradise Lost*, including *Frankenstein*'s creature, might search for their own identities. In comparing themselves to a particular character, though, such readers might grasp only a fraction of who that character is. For instance, when the Creature directly compares his situation to that of Adam or of Satan, "it freezes these characters into specific moments of their histories and in so doing presents them as exempla of singular qualities and singular states

of being” (Allen 57). It is easy to simply look at Milton’s characters as one way or another: God as the epitome of goodness, Satan as pure evil, Adam and Eve as innocent beings led astray; however, to limit these characters to a single characteristic is to ignore their complex natures as they develop throughout the course of the epic poem. Satan, for instance, is not entirely evil, as he has redeeming qualities about him which many readers have found appealing.

In the context of *Frankenstein*, no character is entirely limited by one state of being either. Even though both the Creature and Victor Frankenstein tend to lean towards one Miltonic character over the other, their leanings as well as their personalities constantly change, as they adapt to the changing relationships that exist between themselves and, in the case of the Creature, with others. Because of the nature of this book and because of the characters’ changing natures, it is important to recognize that Frankenstein and his creation are not completely evil, even if both perform evil acts: “[N]o one in *Frankenstein* is evil—the universe is emptied of God and of theistic assumptions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’” (Oates 550). Since the novel takes place in a human world, the existence of evil comes about through human sin rather than through a purely evil character. Thus while Frankenstein might come to refer to his creation as a devil, and the Creature claims that he himself has taken on the persona of Satan, one cannot simply say that he *is* Satan just because he seems to take on an evil nature. Instead, one should recognize the role that *Paradise Lost* has played in the Creature’s life, as it functions for him as “the master narrative, as a hegemonic form that has come to comprise his only sense of reality” (Lamb 316), and it ultimately helps him understand the world and the role he plays within it. With this in mind, one could say that the Creature becomes like Milton’s Satan because his interpretation of

Paradise Lost leads him to believe that his situation somewhat mirrors that of the fallen angel and that he must then act as Satan does.

Ultimately, then, in order to best understand the Creature's character, one should look to the characters who inspire his sense of self. Even though their situations are not entirely the same, there are enough similarities between the Creature and *Paradise Lost*'s Adam and Satan that it is worth seeing just how much Milton's characters have contributed to the development of Shelley's monstrous creation.

The Creature and Milton's Adam

In his purest state, it is easy to see how the Creature can relate to Adam. After all, both of these characters owe their existence to a creator, and both emerge into their prospective worlds as creatures of their own kind. The Creature himself acknowledges this crucial similarity between himself and Adam, but he also recognizes that because his creator is not at all like the being who created the first human, their situations are also quite different:

Like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with, and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature; but I was wretched, helpless and alone. (Shelley 143-4)

Adam's relationship with God is the primary distinguishing factor that separates the Creature from Adam. In the Creature's case, he does not have a creator who is willing to love him and to help him come to understand the new world he inhabits. Instead, as soon as Frankenstein watches his creation come to life, he sees nothing but a monstrosity, and he treats the Creature as

such by rejecting him: “Like Adam, the monster is banished from 'Eden'; in the case of the monster, however, the 'Eden' in question is the possibility of a loving and meaningful relationship with his creator” (Green par. 4). Frankenstein does not want a relationship with a being that does not resemble a human, but he fails to recognize the humanity that does exist within the Creature. As the Creature points out later on, he had been created with human passions. By not taking responsibility for the human-like being he creates, Frankenstein essentially dooms his creation to a life of suffering, which ultimately also dooms himself and the ones that he loves.

Another crucial difference that exists between the Creature and Adam is the way in which they obtain knowledge, and, perhaps even more importantly, language. Both Adam and the Creature emerge into the world, not as babies, but as fully-grown beings. Despite this similarity, however, these two characters possess different levels of knowledge at the time of their creation. In the case of Adam, for example, he already has a language with which he can express himself, and he is even blessed with the knowledge of animals' names, as he comes to know the creatures who live with him in the Garden of Eden through the names that he assigns them: “[I]n a world where names correspond to natures, language *is* knowledge” (Leonard 108). Because language is so essential in Milton's world, the fact that Adam comes to possess it without any effort on his part points to the kind of loving creator that God is.

It is important to recognize that even though Adam and Eve are blessed with incredible knowledge from the start, they are still human, and as such, they naturally have much to learn, especially about themselves: “In the intellectual realm Adam's and Eve's accomplishments are impressive but limited: they do not know astronomy, they need to deepen and perfect their

self-knowledge” (Lewalski 99). Part of this self-discovery involves them recognizing their status as created beings. They have to understand that they have a creator who not only brought them to life, but who also cares enough about them to help them develop as human beings. This process of discovery and learning thus begins when Adam learns he has a creator: “By discourse of reason [Adam] works out the fact that he is not self-generated, and that he ought to discover and adore his Creator” (100). For God, and by extension, for Adam, the establishment of a relationship between creator and creation is crucial. Partly in thanks to the knowledge and to the language with which Adam is blessed, this relationship is able to come to fruition.

By contrast, at the time of the Creature’s “birth,” he has no language, and thus no knowledge, with which to help him understand the world in which he has entered. Although he, like Adam, looks as if he is fully developed, intellectually, he has as much to learn as a young child does: “The Monster, however ill-made, has the potentialities of a child, though starting off, like Adam, fully-grown” (Small 50). Like a young child, he is forced to learn through trial and error. Unlike most children, however, he does not have anyone to help guide him. He must learn to survive and to cope on his own. Without any kind of aid along the way and without the essential gift of language, the Creature eventually comes to realize at just how much of a disadvantage his creator had placed him: “Without his maker to instruct him as God instructs Adam he understands nothing” (Small 48). It is not until the Creature comes across the De Lacey cottage and closely observes its inhabitants that he has any hope of attempting to learn about the human world.

Although the people he comes to think of as potential friends do not actively take it upon themselves to teach him how to be a human, they help him in more ways than Frankenstein ever

does. Through their example, he learns a little about human nature, but, most importantly, he learns how to communicate. As the De Lacey's teach foreigner Safie their language, the Creature learns with her. It is through this newfound form of communication that he also learns how to read, which consequently allows him to learn of Adam's condition through a copy of *Paradise Lost* which he manages to find. After discovering that he, like Adam, has a creator, he then comes across Frankenstein's writings and learns that his creator does not love him in the same way as God loves Adam. The gift of language, then, does not bring him joy, but instead brings him unpleasant feelings of envy and hatred. It also does not bring him closer to his creator, but rather, pushes him farther away. And perhaps the worst part of all is that the Creature has no one to ease his pain or who understands his troubles. After seeing the positive effect a mate has on Adam, the Creature explains: "[N]o Eve soothed my sorrows, or shared my thoughts; I was alone" (Shelley 145). The Creature thus again draws inspiration from Adam and asks his creator to make a female like him. But once Frankenstein destroys the new Eve, it becomes clear once and for all that the Creature cannot truly be like Milton's Adam.

The Creature and Milton's Satan

After discovering that he does not fit as well with Adam's model, the Creature comes to realize that it is to Satan that he should look in order to understand his true condition, for such is the consequence of Frankenstein rejecting him in the way that he does: "Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me" (144). Because Frankenstein ensures that his creation cannot live the life that the Creature so desires, he ultimately transforms into the monster that Victor from the beginning sees when he looks at the frightening figure. He, like

Satan, is transformed by envy, and he thus looks to the fallen angel's example as to how to respond.

The answer, it turns out, is rebellion--a rebellion which will cause his creator as much suffering as possible: "Once he has decided upon rebellion, like Satan, he seeks to exact revenge on his creator by attacking the thing[s] he most loves" (Green par. 9). As Satan is set on destroying God's precious new creatures, the Creature is set on destroying those who Victor most loves, including his best friend and his newly wedded wife. As he kills these individuals, however, he exterminates innocent lives who society would claim do not deserve such a fate,: "[T]he Monster 'rebels' against society's beloved: innocent children, devoted friends, and virtuous women. Since society refuses him community, the Monster takes away these people whom society has deemed worthy of saving" (Lancaster 138). Not only does his creator reject him, but anyone else who sees his figure also refuses to accept him, so the Creature seems to feel justified in his actions.

This is not to say, however, that the Creature has purely evil intentions. At the end of the novel, he explains to Walton: "My heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy; and, when wrenched by misery to vice and hatred, it did not endure the violence of the change without torture, such as you cannot even imagine" (Shelley 218). Despite his thirst for revenge, it is clear that he does not actually wish to become so destructive, at least, not at first. The Creature even admits this is the case when he explains how he had felt remorse after killing Clerval. He may not have felt anything after killing Elizabeth, as, at that point, he has become totally bent on punishing his creator, but by the end, he still shows that he has some goodness in his heart--goodness which no one has allowed him to express because they cannot look past his

exterior. Even as he leads Frankenstein in a chase up to the Arctic, he proves that he is not entirely heartless by occasionally leaving food for his human creator along the way. It is this and other examples of his goodness which have led some scholars to conclude that perhaps the creature is not quite as Satanic as one might originally think: "The demon is (sub)human consciousness-in-the-making, naturally benevolent as Milton's Satan is not" (Oates 546).

Although the Creature claims that he is determined to do only evil, he cannot help but continue to show his naturally loving nature, something which Milton's readers do not often see in Satan.

While it is true that Milton's Satan is not naturally benevolent, however, one should not go on to assume that he is pure evil. In fact, some scholars have suggested that, like the Creature, Satan holds on to some amount of love. This is especially evident when he first looks upon Eve in the Garden and momentarily questions his decision to destroy her: "Satan's natural tendency, when caught unawares, is to love. Beauty and delight are his natural element. Hatred is an effort of his will. ... The incident shows that he is not a destructive automaton, but a creature who chooses to destroy the human race against the promptings of his better nature" (Carey 139). This, indeed, paints a more positive picture of Satan's character, and, even though he remains the clearly defined villain of the story, he gives readers a reason to like him. In this respect, then, perhaps he and Shelley's monster are not quite so different.

There is one particular factor which clearly separates the Creature from Satan. In the Creature's case, he only longs for companionship, which is something which every other human and even Milton's Satan seem to possess: "Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and detested" (144). In this regard in particular, the Creature's and Satan's characters diverge. For the Creature, everyone seems to act as his enemy.

He has no one who would encourage or discourage his behavior. His fate as a character, then, might be even more terrible than that of Satan, for at least the fallen angel has an army at his side and can recognize his place in the world.

Mary Shelley ultimately proves through the Creature's unfulfilling quest to settle on an appropriate identity for himself that with the presence of God out of the question, trying to identify with either Milton's Adam or Satan is fruitless. The Genesis creation story simply cannot work without the presence of a creator who guides and loves his creation as God does. The argument, then, that *Frankenstein* is simply a retelling of *Paradise Lost* seems inaccurate. The Creature looks to Adam and to Satan as representations of himself, but the key to his identity cannot be found in them alone. While their characters can and do help illustrate his predicament at different points in the plot, neither of them can offer him an accurate enough identity which can fully encapsulate his being. If the Creature, then, truly wants to discover who he is, he must create his own identity.

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