
“To Be Answered Only With Groans”: The Language of the Deferred Desire in Frankenstein’s Consciousness

Frankenstein’s Creature is, to be sure, an essential actor in the unraveling of Shelley’s narrative. For this reason, it is logical and arguably necessary to question his unnamed status throughout the novel. He is described as many things: a “monster,” a “wretch,” and a “thing such as even Dante could not have received,” but nonetheless remains officially nameless. Alone, feared, a social pariah at best, the monster is clearly in conflict with the rest of society, but more specifically, the fact that the Creature has no name underscores a further, more fundamental conflict with language itself. The defining aspect of the Creature is his struggle to find identity in a society that abhors him, yet because of the constraints engendered by society’s linguistics, his identity amounts to nothing more than a lack thereof, a void where a sense of wholeness might have been.

As the Creature becomes increasingly aware of himself as a separate and distinct entity, he falls subject to a socially and linguistically influenced set of metaphors and representations that attempt to locate him in relation to the social order, and in turn classify him as an individual. Of greater import, though, is the space between the Creature’s subjective identification and his actual intentions. The charade that language imagines as “self” is at best “a delusory construct plagued in its very constitution by imaginary identifications with a spurious sense of wholeness or unity.” He desperately yearns to positively engage the world, to find companionship and arguably even love, but owes to language the unflinching denial of these desires. Furthermore, there is a space between what the Creature’s appears to wish for (wickedness and destruction) and his true longing, which is to restore a Lacanian union with his creator Dr. Frankenstein so that he might exist as an undifferentiated form of the force from which he originated and channel Lacan’s uncharacteristically unknowable “Real.”

At first I stared back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror. I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am.

The Creature’s realization of his physical self is the genesis of his – and arguably Justine’s, William’s, and Dr. Frankenstein’s — ultimate demise. According to Lacan’s theory of the

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“mirror-stage,” the Creature undergoes a drama “whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency,” and from that moment on assumes “the armor” of an identity whose contours come to shape his development throughout the story. When he discovers the “god-like science” of language as revealed to him through the French family and their “articulate sounds,” he is vitally transformed. As has already been established, language transcends the realm of speech, and its “words” carry a weight we as participators in its scheme could never truly begin to anticipate. Herein lies the difficulty: once the Creature is introduced to the family and their language, he is incarcerated by the fecklessness of linguistic civilization. Though he is first “unable to believe” the reflection, he is given no choice but to embrace what he calls “the monster that I am,” to accept a socially constructed symbol for lack of any other choice.

Lacan borrows from and slightly alters Freud’s idea of the Oedipal Complex, essentially arguing that the human desire to reconcile the hollow, linguistic, fragmented self is gauged by an Oedipal struggle with cultural images and standards enforced by language. The Creature engages the same issue, an issue that often manifests itself in his relationship with the French family in the countryside. A rest in the Creature’s “movement along a chain of desired objects...that can never convert themselves into the object of desire,” the family embodies a part of a series of battles the Creature fights — and continually loses — to retrieve totality. What is interesting, though, is that the family only serves to accentuate his lack of unity. When he visits the family in hopes of winning them over, only to “escape unperceived to his hovel...overcome by pain and anguish,” he realizes that “like Adam” he is “apparently united by no link to any other being in existence.” Here, we grasp as readers that the sense of self-unified identity he searches for has been replaced by an identity defined more by what is not there than what is; the family is involved in uncovering his true identity only by revealing how truly unreachable it is.

Crestfallen and unthinkably alone, the Creature migrates further towards Lacan’s Symbolic Order. Like Addie Bundren of Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (a melancholic, dejected woman contemplating her identity), he is forced to reckon with the jumbled mess of language, a game of signifiers and signified objects, that has come itself to signify only the absence of what he seeks to unearth within himself. Both having been “violated and then made whole again by the violation” created by language, which alienates those who participate in it, they are at the same time empowered with a sense of unity because their being is defined by that very violation.

Why Anse...I would think about his name until after a while I could see the word as a shape, a vessel, and I would watch him liquefy and flow into it like cold molasses flowing out of the darkness into the vessel, until the jar stood full and motionless: a significant shape profoundly without life like an empty door frame; and then I would find that I had forgotten the name of the jar.

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Addie, lying in the dark next to her husband, wonders at the ineffectuality of words, symbols “profoundly without life,” whose meaning loses legitimacy, at which point we forget their names. Addie is more willing to accept her Lacanian fate and the flaws of language — “I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that word was just like the others: just a shape to fill a lack” — than the Creature, who insists that Dr. Frankenstein “comply with his requisition” for a wife, “a companion of the same species, and same defects.”

Nevertheless, both characters are equally powerless in trying to grasp pre-linguistic identities. Addie has learned that we can’t “get at” anything on this earth “until we forget the words,” and the Creature soon discovers that in response to his question, “What was I?” language can answer “only with groans.”

I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion.

Perhaps the most powerful moment in the novel, this is an image of the Creature standing somberly over the newly deceased body of Dr. Frankenstein. At his lowest point, he is confronted in the most absolute manner with the reality of his estrangement from the “Real.” Having been a “slave of language” since his “jaws first opened...while a grin wrinkled his cheeks,” the Creature is, if examined closely, set free from linguistic bondage.

Now that his source, his imagined self-oneness, is quite literally dead, he is no longer forced to face his severance from it. In this sense, he has indeed been aborted, purged of the angst intrinsically present in watching from an empty doorway the “cold molasses” flow slowly from darkness into the vessel of language. Now the creature must come to terms with Dr. Frankenstein’s abortion, and strive to find satisfaction in the shape and echo of the words that whittle the centers of our being into yearning. Lacan’s language, because of its twofold nature, is at once capable of nothing and everything, and it is reasonable to consider, instead of worshipping the frustration, celebrating the substitutes. They are, really, all that we have.

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