
The Transformation of a 'Creature' to the 'Monster': A Psychological Study of 'Body-Shaming' in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Niveditha P¹

II MA, Christ (Deemed to be University), Delhi NCR

Aarthi R. M². (Corresponding author)

Asst. Professor of English, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning
Anantapur Campus, Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract:

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is the story of Victor, who creates a creature to create a life. Horrified by his creation, he abandons it. The creature's subsequent journey, in which he succumbs to social norms, transforms him into a monster. The transformation that makes the creature into a monster is partly related to the abandonment and how the creature is received by society and subsequently by himself. This paper attempts to understand the influence of body shaming and body imagery in transforming the creature into a monster.

Body shaming occurs when an individual is subjected to humiliation or is critiqued for their appearance. Body image is how a person views himself about his body, both positively and negatively. It further sheds light on the influence of society in shaping one's identity as an individual. The creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is body shamed for an appearance for which he is not responsible. The dejection to which he is subjected raises feelings of anger and resentment towards the very human who created him. Thus, it leads to a chain of events that proves to be a catastrophe for the monster as well as his creator.

Keywords: Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Body Shaming, Body Image, Perception of the self, Creature

Introduction

Over the years, the conceived notion of beauty has evolved variably to fit into the standards set by the trendsetters of the time. From accepted round and plump body figures in the Victorian era to the definition of beauty being slender and androgynous features in the postmodern world, beauty has had varied definitions, and the

extremities in each era that were forced on men and women alike were inhumane at times. In the early Greek times, women were expected to look plump and voluptuous, while society expected men to be lean and muscled. For instance, in China's Han dynasty, one can see that the women had to bind their feet to make sure that they did not grow beyond 3 or 4 inches, along with long hair and a slim figure. Ancient Egyptians liked their women with high waists, slender figures, and symmetrical faces. During the Renaissance, wives were supposed to reflect the wealth of their husbands, and therefore, wives were to be plump and full-bodied. In the Victorian era, which is known for the raging use of corsets, women liked to have a slinky waist to show an hourglass figure, which was the standard of the time.

The 1920s wished for women to be more androgynous and even preferred short hairstyles and a curve-less body. The Golden Age of Hollywood brought back into trend the hourglass figure. The sixties preferred a willowier look on women, while the following years to the present chose a more curvaceous, yet lithe, body structure. The women from the Kayan tribe of Myanmar wear brass rings around their necks to elongate them. Women from the Mursi tribe of Ethiopia wear lip rings to make their lower lips seem bigger. In New Zealand, people of the Maori tribe get facial tattoos to identify themselves. Beauty, even with such evolution, has continued to set the standards for society from time immemorial. The trendsetters supported this further with the start of beauty pageants. This set of standards has made a way into society's demand to accept only the ones who would fall under their category and reject and even criticize those who do not fall under those standards. The feeling of repulsion towards what we have assumed to be ugly or unacceptable has resulted from these very standards and has remained somewhat the same. This conditioned feeling of repulsion one may feel towards oneself, or others relates to the concept of body shaming and body image.

The Oxford Dictionary defines body shaming as "the practice of making negative comments about a person's body shape or size" and body image as "a person's mental picture of how good or bad their physical appearance is, especially compared with how they think they should look." The creature in *Frankenstein*, if not for the abandonment and rejection it faced from society, would have been capable of the love and compassion he wished for himself from the very start. But the denial only fuels his anger and the growing resentment in him. The main reason society shuns the monster when he is given the chance to live a regular life is because of the appearance given by his maker, which is viewed as unattractive by society. This paper attempts to look at the transformation of the creature into a monster in the course of the Novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, using the concepts of body shaming and body image.

Lawrence L. Syverud, in his article "A Study of the Gothic and Promethean Themes in *Frankenstein*," discusses that the Promethean myth is closely related to

the creation of the creature. Syverud further looks at *Frankenstein* as a Gothic novel, focusing on the elements of Gothic fiction that are evident in the Novel. Sigmund Freud analyses a person's psyche based on the dreams one dreams of. Thus, the readers can understand the creature's attachment to his creator. Lisa Diedrich, in "Being-becoming-monster," focuses on how the monstrosity of the creature results from the experiences he has to go through in society and not the one he was born with. Wheeler Winston Dixon, in his article, "The Monsters in the Digital Age," talks about how the story of the creature has been distorted to be made into visual media. Noelle Webster, in her article, "Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: The Creature's Attempt at Humanization," talks about how the monster tries its best to become part of the human community by trying to learn its ways and mannerisms, but the constant rejection he faces is a piece of evidence that the creature cannot become a part of human community.

Northam's "Legacy of *Frankenstein*" is an article that focuses on the creation of a creature in which the creator plays an important role. The myth of *Frankenstein* is associated with any scientist, and his creation has gone wrong in the light that the creation differed from what Victor wanted it to be. "Of Monsters and Men," by Saira Mohamed, deals with the victim's trauma as well as the perpetrators' trauma for what he had done. Marcia Bunty Seabury's article, "The Monsters We Create," looks at the monsters, as we term them, as a result of society's selfishness and demands and also affirms that the negativity in monsters is not inherent but made.

"Teaching the Monster" by Melissa Bloom gives an insight into how the creature is perceived as a traumatized child or is inherently evil. Sybille Erle, in her article "Monsters: interdisciplinary explorations in monstrosity," talks about how far the term monstrosity is because the monster is well aware of society and how it works. Courtney Oelberg's "The Culture of the Body" talks about how the creature is not part of either the categories of the beautiful or sublime, but how, to be accepted into society, he had to make himself a new category, i.e., ugly. Arlene Young, in her essay "The Monster Within," says how the monster quality develops inside the creature because of his abandonment by Victor. Veronica B Rosenberger, in her article "What Makes a Monster, What Makes a Man," discusses how the man in the novel *Frankenstein* is evil considering how he is motivated by his need for fame and glory to create life, whereas the monster is an abnormal creature who is blind to the world and its ugly side.

Shreya Saxena, Avya Mathur, and Samiksha Jain in "Body Shaming, Emotional Expressivity, and Life Orientation among Young Adults" deal with how the body image of a person relates to the emotions expressed by a study conducted on 150 students. Naomi Wolf's "The Beauty Myth" is a book that deals with how beauty standards change across the ages and how it is always what people who are considered pretty to be of importance can also be seen that with the improvement of

the social status of women, the pressure they get for reaching the standards set by the society also increases. Sloane Gould, in "Body Shaming and Body Image Issues," deals with how the self-image of a person affects their mindset and how the beauty standards set and popularised by media and other platforms create a negative body image for people. Further, it also talks about the dangers one has to face due to poor body image and how learning to love your body is important.

Body Shaming and Body Image

With the progress of our society, we see a degradation in the morality of its inhabitants. Body shaming and body image play a crucial role in this aspect. Mary Shelley has used this postmodern concept in her work to show how a new life discovers the world around him and, in this attempt, learns of what he is or at least what society has decided him to be. Throughout the story, it is evident through instances where the bodily appearance of the creature is described and portrayed as repulsive. The appearance of the monster is something that is not related to the monster himself, as it was a form chosen by his creator, Victor.

Body shaming occurs in both forward and backward directions. Forward body shaming happens when a person criticizes someone based on their appearance, while backward body shaming may include body shaming oneself by comparing oneself to someone else. When a person's weakness is pointed out in the worst settings, it flares up shame, hurt, anger, and various other feelings in humans. Body shaming is a postmodern concept that deals with how one perceives and views oneself after assimilating the criticisms one receives. In most cases, people develop eating disorders like bulimia or even anorexia, which can further cause weakness and self-consciousness. This further affects a person psychologically in more ways than one. Depression and eating disorders are the most common ones.

The National Eating Disorders Association(NEDA) confirms that a person assimilates thoughts on his body from a very young age. These thoughts, depending on the way people around them present, can be positive or negative, which induces a positive or a negative body image. A positive body image can let a person move ahead with confidence, a negative body image can lead to cases of depression and low self-esteem. Biology also plays an important part in the development of a person's body image. The genetic makeup of a person may determine many bodily features. Moreover, age also contributes to the forming of a negative body image.

Forming a body image has a lot to do with the comments one hears from parents or relatives, social media, and even the role models one looks up to. Any criticism a person receives is received in different ways. Some may take them positively, thus developing a positive body image, whereas some might develop a negative body image. Having a negative body image can lead people to withdraw from any social platform where the chances of being put out into the open for criticism are high. Parents play an important role in the development of an individual's mindset.

More often, children look up to their parents for opinions regarding general matters in life, and if they are not presented by the parents in a way that sounds pleasant, then the psyche of the individual could be affected. Such psychological phenomena would have effects in the long run, and would even need consultation to get back to being themselves. The promotion of thoughts by society that a woman's body is made for criticism, comments, and sexualization further demoralizes a person who could have once had a positive body image and thus promotes the growth of body dissatisfaction.

The patriarchal form of society has made women want to shape themselves according to what men want. In the era of social media influencers, the idealized set on beauty is high, and they force men and women alike into heavy diet practices and even taking supplements to enhance their bodily features. But what results is a deterioration in their mental health. They would always perceive themselves as not being enough and would always be on a quest to reach that stage where they, too, look like what the standards define them to look like.

Frankenstein, published in 1818, was a work of Gothic tales and science fiction. The story was born out of a friendly competition between P.B. Shelley, Lord Byron, John William Polidori, and herself while on vacation in Switzerland. It is a combination of an allegory, a fable, an epistolary novel, and an autobiography. They took it in turn to create stories, which resulted in *The Vampyre* by Polidori and *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. There have been speculations that the creature was a twisted form of all the dead children that Mary gave birth to. An article in the New York Times points out that the creature is part and parcel of Mary Shelley's life, pieced together to form something unnatural. The legacy of *Frankenstein* continues to this day, with it being transposed to other platforms like film, graphic novels, musicals, etc. Various research articles have been published that have focused on the relationship between the creature and the creator and have pointed out that the creator was responsible for the creature turning into a monster. But an aspect that has been ignored so far is the rejection that the creature faced because of his appearance, the effect the rejection had on his psyche, and the feelings that overpowered him in the wake of the self-image he created for himself and the body shaming he had to endure. The mindset of the creature, made by himself, plays an important role in his evolution and his ending.

The plot of the book is revealed through the monster's origin, which is narrated by Victor Frankenstein to Robert Walton, a captain whom he encounters in the North Pole. Walton then writes a series of four letters narrating the same to his sister. Victor was a jubilant child in his early days, but his mother's passing left him feeling utterly despondent, and this sparked an interest in natural philosophy and the genesis of life in him. When he enrolled in classes at the University of Ingolstadt, he had the opportunity to further his research on the creature's body by studying the body parts of corpses from the graveyard. Victor runs away from his creation, horrified by

its appearance, and meets his friend Henry. Henry misdiagnoses his feverish condition as homesickness consoles him and cajoles him to return home.

Victor learns about his younger brother William's passing through a letter from his father just before he leaves and is devastated. When he gets home and goes to the location of his brother's murder, he discovers the monster there. A girl, Justin Moriz, who was adopted by his mother, is convicted for his brother William's murder and is executed. Victor feels guilty as it was the monster he created that was responsible for his brother's death and not Justin. The monster persuaded Victor, when he was on vacation in the mountains, to build a female partner who would be similar to him so that he would not be alone to experience the sufferings brought onto him by the world. Even though Victor commences the making of another monster, he is clouded by the thoughts of how cruel and scary the monster is, and he destroys the new creation before it is given life. The monster roars that he will be with Victor on his wedding night.

Victor relapses into his prior feverish illness when he arrives at a beach after he disposes of the body of the female creature in a lake in the morning, and later, he is accused of murdering Henry. He is taken into custody and interrogated, but later, he is released as he is found guilty. After this, he returns to Geneva and marries Elizabeth after much coaxing from his family as he is still in mourning, but she dies at the hands of the monster the very same night as they reach their cottage for their honeymoon. Victor vows to take revenge and follows the monster. The monster flees to the North Pole as he wants to isolate Victor from civilization before a confrontation. Walton sees the monster crying over Victor's body, and when questioned, he expresses his lonely life and desire to die because he is forever someone who is abandoned with no one to share his joy and pain. The monster fulfills his promise to die by traveling off to the farthest ice as if awaiting his death and being free of a world where he is forever an outcast.

"How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavored to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness, but this luxuriance only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes that seemed almost of the same color as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips." (Shelley 43).

The above lines describe his pursuit of being the creator and carefully choosing the monster's appearance, but ironically, his own creation horrified him. Victor pursues the path of a creator to understand the essence of life and to fill that void in his heart after he loses his mother. The grief led him to pursue knowledge but, ironically, met his end at his creation's hand. Further, the above lines also shed light

on Victor as a parent, is an opinion he reaches the very first time the creature is brought to life, and it serves as a criticism to the creature who is born with no knowledge of the world and requires opinions and explanations for the surrounding life. But he is turned down and is left alone to fend for himself. The creature, when in the process of being given life, was made with great care to make it more appealing. Even when all the different body parts with which the creature is strewn together are the best parts of the unearthed dead bodies, it gives off not the desired but the opposite effect. The creature's grotesque nature is highlighted only once Victor gives him life, and it becomes too late to take it back.

"I had desired it with an ardor that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart." (Shelley 43) The beauty standards of the time valued the proportion or symmetry of the body. Contrary to this, the creature was created with a body that was distorted as it was stitched from different body parts of different dead humans. Although he is a creature made by Victor himself, he cannot help but feel disgusted and repelled by the creature he has created. Here, Victor's opinion is totally influenced by the creature's making process and when it is animated.

The creature that would have been the object of beauty and which would have brought fame for Victor is pushed aside by the reality of the creature, where he is seen as something ghastly and as something that cannot be part of the human community. Being the creator of the creature, Victor should have been able to accept the creature however it is, complete with its disgusting looks and all, but he is the first one to flee and abandon the life he produces. This gives us insight into how no matter what a person is born into if he/she does not fit into the standards of society set for something like beauty, etiquette will never be accepted as a part of it.

"Oh! No mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endowed with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed at him while unfinished; he was ugly then, but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived." (Shelley 44).

Victor reacts adversely to his creation and blames the horrified feeling in its appearance. Although Victor aimed at creating a life that is like the human God created, with his unrealistic and uncorrected assumptions, he created something that is horrible and can never be a part of society, which puts beauty above all. Victor should have owned up to this failure, but he abandoned and ignored the creature. The sublimity of the beings around the creature is torture to him, considering how every person he comes across rejects and treats him with contempt. It creates feelings of disgust in humans due to the creature's incompetence to produce any feelings of love or even sympathy.

The creature is one of his kind and completely different from what humans

have conceived living beings to look like, and this makes it difficult for men to accept the creature. Realizing this very fact, the monster asks Victor to make him a female companion with whom he can share everything, including his sorrows related to the world and the joy he finds in nature. However, the request is met with objection from Victor, who sees this only as a plan by the creature to terrorize more people.

The monster, after his initial rejection, steps out into society to learn its ways and tries to become a part of it, but he is constantly rejected and loses the capability of self-love and self-acceptance. After Victor abandons the creature, he experiences the world where he learns the effects of the elements. Further ahead, he learns human manners by staying hidden and spying on a family, learning from them the human language. However, he was rejected when he only intended to help them. The constant rejection and continued body shaming, which aggravated his hatred toward society, traumatized him. "If I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear!" (Shelley 133). This element of monstrosity is a developed attribute that has emerged because of anger in the monster, which pushes the creature to take revenge on his creator. The creature is initially not plagued by any of the emotions that push him to be a threat to his creator. The monster first uses techniques of blackmailing his creator into making a female companion for himself, but when Victor decides against this, he is made to feel intimidated by the monster. After he loses two of his family members to the monster, Victor is forced to acknowledge that the creature he created has turned into a monster and has to be annihilated for his life to be peaceful again.

"I was dependent on none and related to none. The path of my departure was free, and there was none to lament my annihilation. My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic. What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them." (Shelley 116).

The monster creates a negative image of himself, which is distorted and ashamed and evokes a sense of anger in him. He is conscious of the fact that the surrounding humans differ from him, and not only that, but they differ from one another. He finds himself completely unaware of what he is. The creature questions his existence in a world where he is left with none other than a creator who loathes him. However, with Victor's death, the monster is free from feelings of hatred and anger, as he considers Victor to be the sole reason for his being a monster. This puts him out of his misery, but the feelings he had to endure to reach that phase are distressing. But by the end of the story, we can see that the monster can accept that no matter what, he will forever be an outcast, and in death alone, he will be able to find peace. He accepts the fact and is ready to let go of the life and the appearance he is given now that there is no one in this world for him to express his love or hatred. The creature compares himself to Satan, as in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, who uses his knowledge to undermine God's authority and elevate himself to God's position.

Similar to this, Satan, an angel created by God, rebels against him in order to gain control, and is later punished for his actions. This makes the creature more motivated to avenge Victor for defying all rules to create him.

"I shall collect my funeral pile and consume to ashes this miserable frame, that its remains may afford no light to any curious and unhallowed wretch who would create such another as I have been." (Shelley 208). The creature-turned-monster is finally giving up on the world, and no matter how much he tries to be accepted into the human community by learning human language and mannerisms, he is still an outsider, an abomination to humans. He threatens the existing categories of people by being someone of unique origin, and this leads him to be in a liminal state where he is neither accepted as part of a human community nor a non-human for being ugly. He has to make a classification of his own for himself to exist. Like beauty and ugliness are opposites, the people who inhabit qualities such as these also work in opposite directions. In a world where blond, fair, and thin are beautiful, then they naturally see the opposite of it. Ms. Shelley shows in her Novel that the world can only accept beautiful things and can only be repulsed by the oddities.

Conclusion

The creature's transformation to becoming a monster has included hearing hateful comments about his appearance and actions, which are his pent-up anger directed at society. Victor's abhorrence and negligence of the creature, leading him to abandon the life he created, can be compared to a baby who is new to the ways of the world. Just like an infant learning to walk has to go through the pain of falling and hurting himself, the creature had to stumble across many difficulties to learn about the world, and this only taught him that the world is not a beautiful place as many would claim but an ugly place where he was not welcome into the world where the standards set for appearance were high and didn't give a spot to the creature he was made and for the monster he had become. The creature, in the first place, was never made to be like a human but as someone who is to be a puppet in the hands of his creator, Victor, who only started this path of accomplishing such a task hoping to be elevated to the level of God. The creature in the story becomes a victim of the circumstances into which he is forced, and this incapacitates him to accomplish anything.

The standards that society sets for building, which change with time, are only an obstruction to the growth of society. In a world where the size, color, and shape of humans vary greatly, the ideal standards of beauty are nothing but a negative influence. The creature, just like the diversity we find in humans, is only a result of the genetic makeup or, rather, the making of his body differs from others, but it doesn't have to make him any different from the so-called humans who are believed to be good. Using the word monster itself is a contradiction considering the fact the Latin 'monstrum' means "object of dread," and its later translations mean "a creature

with a birth defect." We can conclude here that the monster is a creature of abnormality. Thus, it can be understood that he would lack the ability to think. Whereas the word men as a root word means "one who has intelligence." This makes it difficult to point out men as good and monsters as evil.

It is the trauma of rejection that the creature carries with him, the shaming he undergoes, and the image he has created for himself that propels him to use his anger against whoever has hurt him. It is that one decision that leads to the events that follow, with Victor abandoning the creature. So, in some ways, we can say that it is society that created the monsters that inhabit it. If we look into the reason a crime is committed, we can see that it is the social circumstances that mostly influence the person to commit a crime. It is the same for the monster who is pushed to commit a crime he doesn't want to do only because he is pushed away by the people when what he wants is to be accepted into society. The world could have been better if only the socially constructed beauty standards didn't ostracise the creation of God and pay attention to the inner beauty that is inherent in everyone, preventing them from becoming monsters and instead transforming them into nurturers.

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