

The Language of Monstrosity in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Madelyn Broome

In a Tortoiseshell: *Madelyn Broome's "The Language of Monstrosity" argues that in film adaptations of Mary Shelley's classic Frankenstein, the creature's lack of language leads to a lack of depth in audiences' emotional responses to the creature's misfortunes. This excerpt highlights the author's use of her key term "human" not just as a familiar tool with which to support her argument but as a mechanism for creating motive.*

Excerpt

Despite the disparaging epithets that are hurled at him throughout his brief life, despite being constantly denied basic human decency, the creature still wants nothing more than to belong. He even claims that his "vices are the children of forced solitude, which" he abhors (113), and that his murderous tendencies could be tamed by his inner goodness if only given the chance to end his isolation. However, when he finally realizes the true nature of humans – so at odds with the grandiose visions of heroism and moral certitude to which his language education introduced him – he curses the duplicity of that "species" which preaches honor, only to deal in base fear and intolerance. He was "nourished with high thoughts of honour and devotion" only to come face-to-face with harsh reality (177). After the creature is cast out by the De Laceys, creature and readers alike begin to realize that "human" is a complicated label. The creature begins to differentiate appearing physically human, like those who wear merely "human form" or the "visage of a human being" (107), and acting humanely. By recognizing these distinctions, he no longer equates outwardly "perfect forms...grace, beauty, and delicate complexions" (84) with inner goodness. He eventually no longer looks "upon them as superior beings" (85) at all, coming to the perversely empowering realization that he has power the story's human characters do not and that, if he cannot make them love his deformed self, he at least has the power to make them fear him (111). This threat is so significant and chilling because, as humans, we recognize our physical weakness relative to other animals and, therefore, base assumptions of our supposed superiority on our ability for intelligence and civilization; yet, Frankenstein's creation represents a creature just as capable of language and cultivation as humans and without the same physical limitations. The creature is taller and stronger than the tallest man, able to bound easily across terrain that no human could surmount without difficulty, survive in the harshest of natural conditions (72), and is cunning and vengeful to boot. It is no wonder that Frankenstein fears him so. The films go about creating a frightful creature in a very different

manner. They play on the fear of a bestial creature who is easy to dehumanize and imagine as a monstrous Other because of his lack of language and, therefore, lack of pathos. While the watchers pity the creature as they would an unfortunate child, the characters fear him as they would an unpredictable wild animal. As seen in the novel, however, a creature in possession of both language and superior physical capacity presents an even greater threat than the films' nonverbal monster does. One represents an existential threat, the other, merely physical.

Author Commentary

Madelyn Broome

This paper was written for the incredible Prof. Susan Wolfson's class 2016 on *Frankenstein* at 200 – a class which explored Mary Shelley's original 1816 story and its enduring influence. Prof. Wolfson left essay topics mostly up to us; nevertheless, my writing process for the essay began the same way it always does: by enjoying what I'm consuming.

Unless I have already noticed a trend that I want to trace, my annotations often simply indicate sections that caught my eye, made me indignant, or made me laugh. Making thorough annotations while reading is an absolute must. Once I'm finished reading or watching, I go back and look at the sections, quotes, or ideas that drew my attention and typically discover that there was a good reason they stood out. This method of annotating has the additional advantage of ensuring that whatever I'm writing about is something that has interested me from the very start.

Preparation is as essential a part of the successful writing process as enjoyment. I find sitting down for just 15 minutes a day for 5 days to brainstorm, craft a thesis, collect quotes, create an outline, and write a skeleton for a paper before filling it out with evidence and analysis saves me immense amounts of stress and allows for an essay that is cohesive and easy to follow, while allowing my ideas time to mature.

As someone who loves language (to a fault at times), this essay on the importance of language in one of my favorite novels and one of my favorite mediums, movies, was such a joy to write. This was the rarer sort of essay that just flowed. As important as it is to plan, pre-write, have an outline, etc., I find it just as important to continue exploring the topic, even as you write. Let the ideas unfurl before you as you proceed, follow them down strange little paths, be open to the unexpected insights, the little gems that you find while writing. If you do so, you may find yourself, as I often do, giving an impressed "oo-oo" with a little shiver of delight when such an insight reveals itself to you. When I started on this paper, I hadn't even thought of the linguistic root that significantly connects humanity, human, humane, and inhuman(e) – a connection that is not only rhetorically interesting but highlighted an important and nuanced part of my argument that I hadn't seen until I began writing. Examining the importance of language also gave me a great opportunity for close reading and allowed me to linger over and savor the words I chose to use, as well as allowed me to expand on the idea of scientific fear that I had explored in an earlier paper from this class (one that was accidentally 19 pages long). When you've done a

good job setting up your paper, are flexible when writing it, and have chosen a topic that interests you, an essay can truly be fun to write.

Editor Commentary

Leina Thurn

Key terms are like ingredients for a recipe. Just as ingredients can tell you what you are cooking and what makes a meal taste unique, key terms can place arguments into specific scholarly contexts and reveal what differentiates arguments within those contexts. In very few essays, however, do authors dare to use a key term like a spice or garnish: not just to create their theses, but to *elevate* them beyond their original composition. Madelyn is one of these authors. In her paper, she examines the term “human” to support her complicated argument about Frankenstein’s creature’s mastery of language in different adaptations of the classic Mary Shelley story. However, in a spectacular motivating move, Madelyn also uses the term to challenge her audience’s conception of what being “human” really entails and to ponder the enduring legacy of *Frankenstein* itself.

In the excerpt above, Madelyn describes how the creature from the original novel, through his experience with humans via language, has an epiphany: that “appearing physically human” does not necessarily entail “acting humanely.” Thus, Madelyn separates the usual concept of a “human” into two parts—appearance and action—only the former of which seems to fall under the term, at least to Shelley’s creature. She parallels this with an epiphany of her own: “[we humans] base assumptions of our supposed superiority on our ability for intelligence and civilization.” Thus, Madelyn further defines her term by equating being “human” with being capable of spoken expression. Armed with her rather unusual definition of a “human,” she is able to explain how and why different representations of the creature in *Frankenstein* adaptations are unsettling to human audiences in different ways.

Madelyn does not stop there. What makes her essay so successful is not only her unique analysis and argument, but her use of her key term to *motivate* her argument. She points out the tension in the strangeness of her definition of “human” through acknowledgement of the un-human creature’s “human”-ness. This she does by describing not only his powers of speech and thought—traits reserved for “humans”—but also his close “doubling” or resemblance to Frankenstein himself, the creature’s creator. Madelyn challenges her audience to consider what being “human” really means, much like Shelley herself does through her novel. Ultimately, this call for introspection becomes an examination of the “human” fears which have driven consumption of Shelley’s story for so long: “inferiority” and “obsolescence.” Who are we if we are only “human”? Madelyn herself summarizes our fears best in the final sentences of her essay: “What is most chilling about her “monster” is not his appearance, but how much of him we

recognize in ourselves. Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a story where the monsters are not fully monsters, the men are not fully men, and good and evil are just a matter of who is telling the story.”

Professor Commentary

Susan Wolfson, Department of English

I met Maddy in the fall of 2016, when, as a sophomore, she enrolled in my Humanities Seminar on “*Frankenstein* at 200.” I was especially pleased to have scientists in this class (which, with students from across the disciplines, distilled into a mini-university every week). Maddy was a reliably brilliant, hardworking, passionately committed presence in all our conversations. She was particularly alert to how the prefix “Franken-.” had become a default for anxiety about scientific developments, especially in matters of genetic engineering, cloning, and post-human creation. Although the requirements for this course, in terms of formal essays, were two mid-size analytic/interpretive exercises, about 7-10 pages, Maddy could not be contained. “The Language of Monstrosity” is an emergence from her work in this course—I can see how it assimilates and advances work from her midterm essay, her endterm essay, her reading-period exercise, and more.

What I loved about working with Maddy is her devotion to becoming better; she loves learning! Not only did she ponder carefully my advice on her first short essay, but she took it all on board and became a far better writer by January 2017 than she had been just the October before. Maddy loved the process of revising, sharpening, developing, and delving. Put this another way: she is a student who wants to put her most devoted thinking into writing, and a writer who is energized by being a devoted student.

Her second essay was no mere 8-10 pager, but an epic 20 pages, “*Frankenstein* and the Haunting of Public Consciousness by Specters of ‘Mad’ Science.” This smartly argued reading of Shelley’s novel also dove into the 20th-century archive of writing about nervous-making science. Maddy brought some key essays from science journals and mainstream presses into focus not only as her critical interlocutors, but also as texts themselves available for critical reading and analysis. How is new science represented? sensationalized? Gothicized? or carefully explained in ways meant to exorcise specters of mad projects and projections? What rhetorics and metaphors guide these discussions? How does persuasion interplay with reporting?

The essay that Maddy completed by Dean’s Date, on the specters of science, represented a semester’s worth of reading, writing, and rewriting. In my own department, this would count as a second-term *Junior-year* project, for its breadth and ambition, and surely would have won one of the department’s prizes for its stunning accomplishment. Fortunately, the Humanities program has distinctions to award, and Maddy’s essay earned a prize there. And no wonder. Maddy’s essay was alert and passionate about the twinned elements that Mary Shelley

represents in young Victor Frankenstein’s undergraduate science studies—more particularly, his *too-independent*, unsupervised senior research project. Maddy traced the unstable inter-animations of idealism, enthusiasm, and sheer passion for new frontiers of knowledge, and tracked the accelerants of egotism and glory-seeking that binds this young scientist to the dark potentials and issues of failed ethical and social responsibility. Maddy showed us how this is not exactly “mad science” but “science” when it becomes forgetful of its human contexts and consequences.

I suggested to Maddy that there were opportunities to improve her essay, especially with a more careful consideration of the “character” of Victor Frankenstein in a work of literary imagination, rather than as a posterboy for wrong science. Wired as she is, Maddy took this to heart and went back to work, back to the lab, and by Dean’s day had produced a new, improved, prize-worthy revision. “This essay,” Maddy wrote in a note to me, “managed to combine almost all my loves: science, language, science fiction, space, inspiring speeches, and the question of ‘why’?” I’d say it also involved all of Maddy’s skills, too—careful thinking, careful reading, careful research, careful attention to advice, and impassioned hard work and love of writing.

“The Language of Monstrosity” appears to be developed from the reading period assignment, which was to write about one or two cinematic stagings of the novel, with attention to what cinema (a visual as well as a verbal medium) does, for better or worse. Maddy’s skills of attention and insight are on full display here, as well as her lively—shall we say “animated”? —writing. How apt that this essay is about the Creature’s discovery of words—first of the physical needs for life; then of family relationships; then of behavioral valuation; then of ethical valuation. These key elements, Maddy shows, propel the Creature’s emerging literacy in the relations of syntax and the foundations of grammar—that is, a recognition of the language science, with a sense that language can not only describe, but penetrate, and produce experience. And so, Maddy shows, the Creature’s victimization by disparaging, abusive language pivots into his determination to “master” this “godlike science” as his only, deeply invested hope, of finding human company, companionship, and acceptance. Her readings of the films’ versions of these scenes of learning—the Creature’s serial language labs—are smart, engaging and provocative.

Works Cited

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus*. Ed. Susan J. Wolfson. 2nd ed. N.p.: Pearson Education, 2007. Print.

Bios

Madelyn Broome '19 is a desert rat from Tucson, Arizona. She is majoring in Astrophysics with a certificate in Planets and Life (and is pretending there is an English certificate by taking lots of English classes). Outside of class, she can be found practicing for various sports or heading science communication or outreach groups. She wrote this essay as a sophomore.

Leina Thurn '20 is a sophomore from Ashburn, Virginia, who is excited to be on the *Tortoise* staff this year. Outside of *Tortoise*, she works as a Fellow at the Writing Center and is a member of several clubs, including the Linguistics and the Classics clubs. Fittingly, she is a prospective Classics (Ancient History) concentrator with her eyes set on certificates in Linguistics and Archaeology.