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Marxism in Frankenstein

Since the advent of Marxism, literary critics have analyzed works in attempts to extract elements of the political philosophy. As critic Terry Eagleton asserts, the aim of "Marxist criticism...is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history." Marxist analysis of a literary work seeks to gauge the political motivations of the work, and determine the extent to which the work explores struggle between the classes. The novel Frankenstein by Mary Shelley is an excellent basis for Marxist analysis because of the overriding social and political implications brought forth by the characters.

There are several class distinctions and tensions in Shelley's text. This is mostly established through the dynamic of the novel's two central characters: Victor Frankenstein, and his monster. Much like Marxist theory recognizes a historical struggle between the classes, Shelly's novel puts this struggle on display for the reader. Marx's *Communist Manifesto* explains that two classes exist: the owners of the means of production (the bourgeoisie) and the working class (the proletariat) (220). Clearly, Frankenstein himself symbolizes the bourgeoisie, whereas his monster is more similar to the proletariat. There is a definitive struggle between the two forces, with Frankenstein enjoying the consolidation of power, and effectively exerting control over the exploited "lower class": his very own creation. Shelley is essentially providing the Marxist critique of capitalism in the relationship between Frankenstein and his monster. Frankenstein

becomes consumed by his creation, virtually enslaving himself to his object; this is similar to what Marxist theory identifies as the products of labor. The monster, in turn, becomes powerful and takes a stand against his creator, who he regards as unfamiliar and antagonistic. This dynamic mimics the bourgeoisie/proletariat condition, as Frankenstein has created something that he can't understand or ultimately even control.

There is evidence to suggest that this novel is largely revolutionary in its ideology. One cannot discount the significance of Shelley's background; biographer Johanna Smith indicates that her parents were two extremist philosophers (7). Also, given the historical context of the work, with the English revolution impacting the novel's setting, and the French and Haitian revolutions both casting a backdrop for Shelley's writing, it is quite manifest that there is a revolutionary spirit to the text. A Marxist reading indicates that the novel heavily plays on societal fear of uprising and revolution. After all, the monster, symbolizing the lower class, does revolt against its creator, so the theme of revolution is easily discernable.

As aforementioned, Frankenstein is representative of the ruling class in this work. Frankenstein comes from a wealthy background, and there is ample evidence to suggest that his worldview is shaped by his privileged position: "My family is one of the most distinguished of [Geneva]. My ancestors had been for many years counselors and syndics; and my father had filled several public situations with honour and reputation. He was respected by all who knew him, for his integrity and indefatigable attention to public business" (Shelley 40). Coming from a distinguished background, Frankenstein is prideful and somewhat selfish. These characteristics become palpable in his treatment of his creation. Frankenstein's distinct place in the social order causes him to oppress his

monster, much as the bourgeoisie do to the proletariat. Part of Marx's *Manifesto* which is most pertinent to this is: "Modern bourgeois society...is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells" (225). Clearly, Frankenstein loses control of his own creation, much like Marx would argue that an oppressive society would succumb to the demands of a revolting lower class. Adding to the idea that Frankenstein's worldview is strongly shaped by his background is speculation that one of Shelley's models for Frankenstein was her husband Percy. Percy Shelley was the son of a wealthy country squire with royal ancestry and a political stronghold (Dickinson College). Similarly, Victor's family is quite distinguished, with very influential ancestors. As to how this reflects on Percy/Victor's respective worldviews, it is alleged that Percy left Mary to have an affair with her step-sister right after Mary had given birth to their premature baby (Bennett). Similarly, Victor runs away from his creation when the monster comes to life and comes toward him. Privilege seemingly instilled a lack of responsibility in both the real Percy Shelley and the fictitious Victor Frankenstein.

Frankenstein's monster is clearly in a less privileged position, being the symbol of the oppressed/proletariat. Much like the proletariat is "created" by the bourgeoisie, the monster is created by Frankenstein. Another parallel is that the monster is created from many different parts, similar to the segmented population mix that composes the proletariat. Marxism asserts that the proletariat "is recruited from all classes of the population" (Marx 228). Shelley writes that Frankenstein "collected bones from charnel houses... In a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments by a gallery and staircase, I kept my workshop of filthy creation:

my eye-balls were starting from their sockets in attending to the details of my employment. The dissecting room and the slaughterhouse furnished many of my materials,” (58-9). Not only can the reader see the segmentation of the monster’s creation, but also the contempt that Frankenstein harbors toward it, describing it as “filthy.” Furthermore, a Marxist reading of the text would indicate that the monster’s physical size and prowess are meant to symbolize the large population and strength of the laboring proletariat class. The monster is a lot larger than Frankenstein, and the disparity in size parallels the differences in population between the proletariat and bourgeoisie. The monster states “thou hast made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine; my joints more supple” (Shelley 93). Not only is the monster far more physically imposing than his creator, a figurative reference to population disparity, but his literal suppleness can be interpreted as a reference to the roughness that the labor class has developed. Unlike the richer bourgeoisie, the proletariat does engage in lavishness, and accordingly develop stronger physical traits.

The story of Victor and his creation has strong implications regarding the reversibility of power in the novel’s world. The oppressed monster does rise up in revolt against the oppressive creator in many ways, and proves to be a force to be dealt with. However, it is also interesting to note that Frankenstein’s monster becomes something of a martyr for his own cause. The monster causes great harm to Frankenstein, and does ultimately outlast his creator. This fact brings great sadness to the monster, who mourns Frankenstein’s death: ““That is also my victim! ... Oh, Frankenstein! generous and self-devoted being! what does it avail that I now ask thee to pardon me? I, who irretrievably destroyed thee by destroying all thou lovedst. Alas! he is cold, he cannot answer me””

(Shelley). Frankenstein's monster then leaves to die. Although the monster has successfully overthrown his creator, he is not successful at establishing his own life in accordance with human standards. Perhaps this is Shelley's indictment of the inadequacies of Marxist philosophy, and the difficulty in establishing success following the overthrow of established regime. So while Shelley's text does seem to confirm that the oppressed can find themselves on the other side of the power equation, there is no such confirmation that the oppressed can then maintain this power and stabilize without self-destructing.

Works Cited

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