

Society versus genetic influence on the Monster's moral character

Mary Shelly's novel of Frankenstein's story is an amazing and fascinating science fiction work, especially for being almost 200 years old and makes the reader wonder why the writer had these thoughts. The time period had many scientific advances as she must have known about the experiments of Galvani and Volt with their papers on electricity. And so she came up with an idea of Dr. Frankenstein who used electricity to bring to life human parts from various bodies, to include the ever-critical brain. Shelley's description of nature and the stories' surroundings are very romantic and her writings make me believe she was a fan of Jean Jacques Rousseau, a Swiss-French Philosopher, who was well known for his theory of the "natural man." Rousseau argued that we are inherently good, but we become corrupted by the evils of society. His motto is *"We are born good - and that is our natural state"*, (Jean-Jacques Rousseau on nature, wholeness and education). This description parallels the Frankenstein's monster that is described as a nice, intelligent, literary, and glad to help gentle giant with a sense of love for people and nature. All he wants is Victor's attention and to be accepted into society. He is being denied the acceptance he yearns from Victor and by all the people he meets throughout the story.

Who was this writer of so long ago having thoughts of turning dead flesh back into life? Could the monster remember what happened before his creation or was his present actions influenced by the genes of his prior host's body? These thoughts lead me to my most intriguing question and that is, does the human brain at birth automatically start with positive, negative

or a neutral attitude or in other words, does a brain come with a predisposition? The author develops Frankenstein's monster to initially act as a little child that is innocent, but learns hatred, jealousy, revenge and to the ability to kill as he is allowed to mentally mature without parental guidance and morale input. *"Many genes require changes in the social environment in order to exert their influence. Human and animal studies suggest that effective parental care may thwart the expression of adverse genes on aggressive behavior in youngsters,"* (David Reiss, M.D.) The monster had to learn to read and communicate, but knew well enough how to walk and where to find food. These actions lead me to believe Dr. Reiss's opinion that his senses knew what to do in order to keep him alive as his basic nature connected to his re-wiring of his cognitive processes and eventually yielding the monster that threatens and kills with little remorse.

"It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original era of my being; all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct. A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard, and smelt at the same time; and it was, indeed, a long time before I learned to distinguish between the operations of my various senses." (Shelley, Chapter 11, first two sentences)

The aforementioned passage is all we have as readers to work with on the stories' development of the monster's cognitive abilities. The words are a starting point for the book's audience to know that the miracle of life without conception does not allow the brain to bring the years of learning along for the next adventure. But how could this freak of science learn and adapt to the games humans play against one another so easily? Where did he learn to

blackmail Victor by threatening to kill his wife on his wedding night if he does not create a mate for the monster or how does he premeditate the crime of placing a necklace of Victor's little brother in a pocket of Justine's dress in order to frame her for a murder? Were these acts of certain memories stored in his unconsciousness mind? Were these his genes that every person carries with them for generations? Since he was not exposed to this level of calculated behavior, his actions had to come from somewhere.

His brain, in my opinion, was far more mature than a child's. Were deep thoughts attributed to the DNA from his previous donor as his mind grew? Mary Shelley did not clarify anything about the creature's brain. This brings me back to the question about infants who enter our world and the idea of having a good, bad or neutral mind. I think Shelley is trying to warn us that society might be the one who forms and shapes the characters of people and her story is but one example of what kind of influence society can have on a human being. I agree with her that the monster was shaped by rejection of the society he was subject to, but I think he had to have something inside of him that was later supported and enhanced into a cold-blooded killer. Like parents that have five children with all of them being raised in the same environment and four of them are very nice, well-mannered and with good grades in school, yet one is reckless, a thief, and is not passing in school.

"Are behaviors inbred, written indelibly in our genes as immutable biological imperatives, or is the environment more important in shaping our thoughts and actions? Such questions cycle through society repeatedly, forming the public nexus of the "nature vs. nurture controversy." (Joseph McInerney and Mark Rothstein)

The “nature vs. nurture” argument has been an issue since the beginning of children’s psychology. People who believe in the concept of nurture, which means without any predispositions, blame society for both their happiness and unhappiness and overall plight of the life they are leading. On the other side will be the followers of genetic predisposition and they believe every person is born with their attitudes and overall personality and really cannot be changed much by our childhood environment. Both of these concepts are on contrasting edges of the make-up of whom each of us become due to varying drives, desires, and even how likeable we appear to others. I am a very realistic person and I do not believe many things are black or white, only a zero or a one or any other polar opposite. I believe scientists will agree that the mixture of both arguments; nature and nurture, predisposition and society are combined in determining how successful and happy a person becomes in life. In my opinion, Frankenstein’s monster had both nature and nurture involved in his personality and thus his moral character led to the “gentle giant” turning into a calculating killer worthy of his name.

Works cited:

”Jean-Jacques Rousseau on nature, wholeness and education”, Michele Erina Doyle and Mark K. Smith (2007), <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-rous.htm>, web. 16 Oct. 2012

David Reiss, M.D., Responses to a question posed to presenters and participants at the “Genetic Influences on Human Behavior and Development Conference” held at Brown University this spring (2001), http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Human_Development_Center/pubs/l5respns.html, web.16 Oct. 2012

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, Chapter 11, first two sentences <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/shelley/mary/s53f/>, web.16 Oct. 2012

Joseph McInerney and Mark Rothstein; what implications does behavioral genetics research have for society? http://www.ornl.gov/sci/techresources/Human_Genome/elsi/behavior.shtml, web 16 Oct. 2012