



Frankenstein and the Politics of Embodiment: A Disability Studies Perspective

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Abstract

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818) has long been read as a cautionary tale of scientific overreach, moral responsibility, and the gothic sublime. However, within the framework of disability studies, the novel acquires a different resonance. It emerges as a foundational text that interrogates the construction of monstrosity, the social marginalization of non-normative bodies, and the ethical limits of human experimentation. This article explores Frankenstein as a literary case study that challenges dominant narratives around ability, normalcy, and personhood. Through a critical re-examination of the Creature's embodied experience and Victor Frankenstein's scientific ambition, the novel can be understood as a proto-critical disability narrative that questions the very grounds on which the human is defined.

Introduction

Disability studies, as an interdisciplinary field, interrogates the cultural, social, and political construction of the “disabled” body. It moves away from medical models of disability that locate deviance in the body and instead focuses on how societal structures disable certain forms of embodiment. Within this framework, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein can be read not only as a gothic novel or a critique of Enlightenment science but also as a profound meditation on the politics of corporeal difference.

The Creature as a Disabled Subject

The Creature in Frankenstein is not born with a disability in the conventional sense; rather, he is assembled, stitched together from fragments, and animated by Victor Frankenstein's hubris. From the moment of his “birth,” he is subjected to visual othering. Victor's reaction—“breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (Shelley 56)—is predicated not on any moral failing but on the Creature's physical appearance. This immediate revulsion parallels what disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-

Thomson refers to as the “stare”, the social act of visually defining and isolating the disabled subject (Garland-Thomson 56).

The Creature's exclusion is fundamentally aesthetic and corporeal. He is judged by the way he looks rather than the content of his character. In this, he becomes emblematic of the socially constructed nature of disability, where deviance is not innate but imposed through cultural norms of appearance and ability.

Disability and the Failure of Care

Victor Frankenstein's failure is not only scientific but also profoundly ethical. Upon creating the Creature, he refuses any responsibility for its well-being. Disability studies emphasize the role of systemic neglect and institutional failure in disabling individuals. Victor's abandonment mirrors this dynamic, positioning the Creature as a figure made vulnerable not by his body but by the lack of social care and recognition.

As Lennard J. Davis notes in *Enforcing Normalcy*, disability arises from the enforcement of an able-bodied

norm rather than from intrinsic bodily deficits (Davis 23). The Creature is disabled not simply by his form but by the relational violence of abandonment, rejection, and social exclusion.

Voice, Language, and the Question of Humanity

Despite being denied a name and lineage, the Creature exhibits remarkable linguistic and emotional depth. His narrative, embedded within the novel's nested structure, is a powerful act of self-representation. His plea—"I am malicious because I am miserable" (Shelley 121)—reveals a consciousness shaped by pain, longing, and social estrangement. Disability studies often emphasize the importance of restoring agency and narrative authority to disabled subjects. Shelley's novel partially succeeds in this by giving the Creature a voice, even as he is denied social acceptance.

Moreover, the fact that others never look beyond his appearance to recognize his humanity resonates with modern critiques of how disabled individuals are dehumanized, infantilized, or rendered invisible in public discourse.

Monstrosity and the Medical Model

The concept of "monstrosity" in *Frankenstein* can be read as an early iteration of the medical model of disability—one that pathologizes the body and seeks to fix or eliminate difference. Victor's desire to construct life through scientific mastery reflects Enlightenment-era fantasies of biological control, echoing later eugenic ambitions to purge deformity and difference from the human genome.

However, Shelley's novel ultimately destabilizes these fantasies. The scientific triumph is hollow, and the "perfect" being turns out to be an object of horror. In doing so, *Frankenstein* critiques not just the act of creation but the ideology of perfectionism that underlies it.

Conclusion

By approaching *Frankenstein* through the lens of disability studies, we uncover a rich subtext about embodiment, marginalization, and social responsibility. The Creature is not a monster by nature but a disabled subject made monstrous by a society that equates difference with danger. Mary Shelley's novel, far from being an outdated gothic fantasy, offers a still-relevant critique of how normative frameworks of ability and appearance shape ethical relations and human recognition.

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