Traumatic Responsibility: Victor Frankenstein as Creator and Casualty

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A rich theme running through Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is responsibility. In a straightforward—even didactic—way, the novel chronicles the devastating consequences for an inventor and those he loves of his utter failure to anticipate the harm that can result from raw, unchecked scientific curiosity. The novel not only explores the responsibility that Victor Frankenstein has for the destruction caused by his creation but also examines the responsibility he owes to him. The creature is a new being, with emotions and desires and dreams that he quickly learns cannot be satisfied by humans, who are repulsed by his appearance and terrified of his brute strength. So the creature comes to Victor, pleading—and then demanding—that he create a female companion with whom he can experience peace and love. While Victor is grappling intellectually and practically with the implications of being responsible both for and to the creature, he is also experiencing responsibility as a devastating physical and emotional state. In this way, Mary Shelley raises a third aspect of responsibility—its impact on the self.

What Is Responsibility?

The word responsibility is a noun defined as either a duty to take care of something or someone or the state of being the cause of an outcome. The word is familiar to everyone. Indeed, we order our daily lives based on our ideas about responsibility, whether we are referring to the duties we have to care for others—for instance, children—or our understandings about who or what has caused there to be food on our plates or a drought in California. The concept is especially important to students of philosophy and law.

In philosophy, special attention is paid to the concept of "moral responsibility," which refers not to a cause-and-effect relationship nor to the duties that come with occupying particular roles in society but to the determination that someone deserves praise or blame for an outcome or state of affairs. Humans' ability to be held morally responsible is closely tied up with the ideas about the nature of persons—specifically that persons have the capacity to be morally responsible agents. In Frankenstein, Mary raises questions about who is and is not capable of moral responsibility. At the beginning of the book, she introduces a protagonist who appears capable of being held morally responsible for his actions and an antagonist (the creature) who does not. But as the story develops, she raises questions about which of the two is the truly rational actor—Victor, who is addled by ambition, fever, and guilt, or the creature, who acquires emotion, language, and an intellect.

In law, responsibility is generally attributed in a two-step process. Judges and juries are first asked to determine whether the person caused the outcome in question—Did the accused pull the trigger on the gun that fired the bullet that killed the victim? They must then decide whether the person did so with the requisite intent, called *mens rea*. A killer who intended to kill the victim could be guilty of first-degree murder, but the legal responsibility assigned to someone who shot the victim accidentally might be manslaughter or another less-serious offense. A number of factors can interfere with legal responsibility, such as age (children are generally excused), compulsion (if someone has a gun to your head, you might not be held responsible for the actions they instruct you to perform), and mental defect (e.g., insanity). As with the determination of moral responsibility in a court of law, an attempt to attribute legal responsibility in Frankenstein quickly becomes complex. Although it might initially seem that Victor should be the one held legally responsible not just for the existence of the creature but for the havoc he wreaks, we also must consider that the creature quickly develops the capacity

for rational thought, raising the possibility that he may qualify as an actor capable of both causing harm and forming the intention to do so. Given the sophisticated way the creature develops, by the end of the book he alone might be held legally responsible for the deaths he causes.

Victor experiences the two basic meanings of the word responsibility. He creates the creature (he causes it to exist), and therefore he has at least some responsibility for what the creature goes on to do. As the creature's maker, Victor also has both a duty to others to keep them safe from his creation and, Mary seems to be saying, a duty to his creation to ensure that his existence is worthwhile. We will turn to these two ideas now—responsibility for and responsibility to.

Responsibility for Our Creations

In a very straightforward way, Victor causes the monster to exist. He builds him, freely and with the hope, indeed the intention, that he will come to life. This creation is no accident. Although many factors can arguably interfere with attributions of responsibility—including compulsion and delusion—there is no suggestion that Victor does not intend to make the creature, despite the frenzied way he goes about it. Indeed, Victor anticipates his future responsibility for the existence of the creature with pleasure and excitement—even triumph: "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve their's" (p. 37).

Victor's error is failing to think harder about the potential repercussions of his work. Although he says that he hesitated for a long time about how to use the "astonishing" (p. 35) power to "bestow animation upon lifeless matter" (p. 37), this hesitation is due to the many technical hurdles that he needs to overcome rather than to any concern for the questionable results of success. He considers the good that might come from his discovery—it might lead to development of a method for bringing the dead back to life—but he fails to consider the future of his initial experimental creation. Although he is aware that the single-minded pursuit of his scientific goals is throwing his life out of balance, he utterly fails to consider the possibility that the form he has stitched together and will soon animate may go on to cause harm to anyone, including Victor himself. We might compare Victor to some modern scientists who have stopped their work to consider its potential for harm, such as those who gathered at Asilomar in the mid-1970s to consider the implications of research on recombinant DNA or those who recently called for a moratorium on germline gene editing.

Victor's failure to thoroughly anticipate responsibility—to consider that there might be both upsides and downsides to his technical achievement—is his downfall. As soon as the creature opens his "dull yellow eye" (p. 41), Victor is filled with "breathless horror and disgust" (p. 42). He flees, initially so agitated he is unable to stand still, eventually falling into a nightmare-filled sleep in which he sees his fiancée, Elizabeth, first "in the bloom of health" (p. 43) and then as a rotting corpse. Victor is woken by the creature but "escape[s]" again (p. 43). He is unable to face his creation and is unprepared for the creature's independent existence.

As the story progresses, Victor's initial emotional reactions to seeing the creature come to life—disgust and horror—are substantiated by the creature's actions. Victor learns that the creature has killed his young brother William, whose death is then blamed on a family friend, Justine. But Victor knows the truth. He understands that he would be implicated in her

execution if she is convicted as well as in the murder of his brother—"the result of my curiosity and lawless devices would cause the death of two of my fellow-beings" (p. 62). He suffers greatly under this guilt—"the tortures of the accused did not equal mine; she was sustained by innocence, but the fangs of remorse tore my bosom, and would not forego their hold" (p. 65). But he does nothing to intervene. The girl is unjustly convicted. "I, not in deed, but in effect, was the true murderer" (p. 75).

Victor continues to hold himself responsible for both the existence of the horrifying creature and the creature's deadly deeds. He spends his remaining days on earth chasing the creature across the Arctic, intending to kill him. But in this understanding of his responsibility, he is alone—no one else in the novel sees Victor as anything but a casualty of unspeakable misfortune. Although he is at one time accused of murdering his friend Henry Clerval—who is killed by the creature—that charge is eventually dropped (ironically, as Victor leaves the prison, an observer remarks, "He may be innocent of the murder, but he has certainly a bad conscience" [p. 153]). Even Robert Walton, the explorer who encounters Victor on the ice and to whom Victor narrates his entire story, judges him to be noble, gentle, and wise. It is left to Victor's own conscience—and to the reader—to assess the extent to which he should be held responsible for the creature's deeds. On this question, Victor is resolved. Although he allows that he did not intend to create a creature capable of such evil, he continues to hold himself responsible for the creature's existence and for the deaths the creature causes, and he dies believing himself duty bound toward his fellow creatures to destroy his creation.

Responsibility to Our Creations

On his deathbed, Victor also acknowledges that he is not just responsible for the creature but also responsible to him: "I … was bound towards him, to assure, as far as was in my power, his happiness and well-being" (p. 181). The creature himself makes this argument forcefully when he confronts Victor in the mountains overlooking the Chamonix Valley. The creature relates all that has transpired since Victor abandoned him. He has learned to find food and shelter. By closely observing a human family, he has learned about emotion and relationships as well as how to speak and read. By finding a collection of books, he learns the rudiments of human society and history. Yet on each attempt to engage with humans, the creature is disastrously rejected—sometimes even attacked. He learns that humans are repulsed by him. Concluding that humans will never accept him into their moral community, he comes to see humans as the enemy. He now lays his pain and loneliness at Victor's feet: "Unfeeling, heartless creator! you had endowed me with perceptions and passions, and then cast me abroad an object for the scorn and horror of mankind. But on you only had I any claim for pity and redress, and from you I determined to seek that justice which I vainly attempted to gain from any other being that wore the human form" (p. 116).

To assuage his loneliness, rage, and pain, the creature demands that Victor "create a female for me, with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being" (p. 120). The creature tries to reason with Victor: "Oh! my creator, make me happy; let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit! Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing; do not deny me my request!" (p. 121). Although Victor's sympathies are stirred by the creature's story and his plea for companionship, Victor immediately refuses out of a sense of responsibility to protect the world from "wickedness" (p. 139).

By having her inventor create a sentient being—in particular one whose intellect and emotions rival or surpass those of her supposed protagonist—Mary sharpens the point about the

responsibility that we might owe to our creations. Parents understand this point (and in many ways Victor is placed in the role of a parent—albeit one who rejects and abandons his child). And so must scientists working to create new or modified life-forms carry a responsibility to their creations. We can take the point even further: a sense of responsibility can be experienced by anyone who pours time and energy into a project, even if that project does not result in a new life form. We can legitimately speak about feeling an obligation to our work—including to our results, our ideas, or our findings— that it deserves to be published or further developed or recognized as valuable not only because it can benefit others or result in glory for ourselves but because of the intrinsic value of new knowledge.

Responsibility as an Experience

One of the most striking aspects of Mary's treatment of responsibility is her depiction of its emotional and physical toll. Before Victor gains any insight into the deadly consequences of his scientific work or the onerous duties he has thereby acquired, he experiences responsibility as an emotional and physical state. At the very moment he animates his creation, "the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart" (p. 42). He runs from the room, paces back and forth, "unable to compose my mind to sleep" (p. 42), falls into a sleep filled with nightmares portending the death of his fiancée, and wakes in a cold sweat with his limbs convulsing. He goes outside and by chance meets his friend Henry Clerval, who notices his agitated mood and then spends several months nursing Victor through a "nervous fever" during which "the form of the monster on whom I had bestowed existence was for ever before my eyes, and I raved incessantly concerning him" (p. 46).

Victor recovers from this first episode, but his recovery is short-lived. As the creature kills his family and friends, Victor grapples with the realization that he is responsible for the existence of the creature and to a certain extent is therefore responsible for the creature's deeds. His grief at the death of little William and then of Henry are compounded and tainted by his guilt at the role he has played in their deaths. He cannot sleep, and his physical health declines. His concerned father implores him to move beyond his grief and reenter the world, "for excessive sorrow prevents improvement or enjoyment, or even the discharge of daily usefulness, without which no man is fit for society." But Victor is unable to respond: "I should have been the first to hide my grief, and console my friends, if remorse had not mingled its bitterness with my other sensations" (p. 72).

As the story progresses, Victor continues to suffer emotionally and physically. His family and friends are alarmed and try to help him, but Victor cannot be reached. He withdraws from their company, floating aimlessly on a boat on the lake, unable to find peace. He hikes in the mountains during a rainstorm. He travels to England, ostensibly to see the world before settling down in marriage but in reality to build another creature. He describes the time as "two years of exile" (p. 130), and he bemoans his inability to enjoy the journey or the people he meets on his way. He describes a visit to Oxford, noting that he "enjoyed this scene; and yet my enjoyment was embittered both by the memory of the past, and the anticipation of the future. … I am a blasted tree; the bolt has entered my soul; and I felt then that I should survive to exhibit, what I shall soon cease to be—a miserable spectacle of wrecked humanity, pitiable to others, and abhorrent to myself" (p. 135).

As the book concludes, Victor lay dying in Walton's boat. The explorer and the reader are left in no doubt about what has killed him. When the creature boards the boat and sees the newly dead Victor, he claims responsibility for his death—"That is also my victim!" the creature

exclaims. “I, who irretrievably destroyed thee by destroying all thou lovedst” (p. 183). Yet it is not only the loss of his family and friends that destroys Victor but also the guilt and remorse that came with being the one who so naively created the creature and gave him life.

Conclusion

In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley explores at least three aspects of responsibility: Victor’s responsibility for the deadly actions committed by his creation and the threat the creature’s existence poses to his family, friends, and, Victor fears, the entire world; Victor’s responsibility to his creation for the creature’s welfare and well-being; and the consequences of this weighty responsibility for Victor both physically and emotionally.

The novel is a gothic horror—the plot is fantastical, the scenery dramatic, and the hero doomed. But it is also a cautionary tale, with a serious message about scientists’ and engineers’ social responsibility. Mary conveys a concern that unchecked scientific enthusiasm can cause unanticipated harm. For Victor, scientific curiosity threatens the integrity of his family and disrupts his ability to engage with nature and enter into relationships. By supplying a protagonist who suffers so greatly as a result of failing to anticipate the consequences of his work, Mary urges upon her readers the virtues of humility and restraint. In her development of a creature who suffers so greatly because he is despised and rejected by an intolerant human society, she asks us to consider our obligations to our creations before we bring them into being.

The reader is left to wonder whether the story could have unfolded differently if Victor were to have behaved more responsibly. Might he have anticipated the brute strength of his creation and decided not to create it, or might he have altered his plan so that the creature would be less powerful and less terrifying? Rather than abandoning the creature, might he have stepped into his parental role and worked to ensure the creature’s happy existence? Mary does not tell us what Victor should have done differently—that is the reflective work that we readers must do as we consider our own responsibility to and for our modern-day creations.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*: Annotated for Scientists, Engineers, and Creators of All Kinds (p. 302-310). Kindle Edition.