Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein blurs divisions between master and slave, creator and created, human and monster. The novel presents creation as inherently monstrous, as dissolving discrete boundaries between self and other even as it fragments any possible sense of social, psychological, or self-unity. Daniel Cottom, in “Frankenstein and the Monster of Representation,” describes Frankenstein’s monster as the embodiment of chaos and confusion, the emblem of any lost coherent whole, of the “inability to rise from disordered particulars to an organizing concept, from individuals or qualities with individuals to the species” (Cottom, 61). For Cottom, the monster is not only the result of one man’s ambitions, but also a symptom of the broader impulse to represent or create within a language or medium that can never accommodate its referent.

For this is the parable of Frankenstein: in seeking to represent himself, man makes himself a monster. Or, to put it in other words: Frankenstein’s monster images the monstrous nature of representation. . . . The size of the monster magnifies a faulty relationship between the inside and the outside of his body as well as a lack of harmony on the surface of his body. His features are related to each other by a contiguity without any substantial ground, for they either contrast too much or too little and are not even distinguishable as external features from the muscles and arteries that also appear on the surface. [60]

The monster’s grotesque body highlights the uncanny nature of the human body itself, exaggerating the body and making it exceedingly visible. This visibility is at odds with the organic “contiguity” of the physical form: the parts are beautiful in and of themselves, but when connected to one another they add up to an excessive, unharmonious whole.

Some of the monstrosity of Frankenstein’s experiments stems, for Cottom, from the corruption of sexual reproduction. Cottom points out that the monster, who calls himself an “abortion,” has a father but no mother: “It is the female which is missing in the authorship of the monster” (69). But sexual reproduction itself seems equally corrupted in Frankenstein as children and mother-figures, sisters and wives die in rapid succession. Cottom insists that the male creator “distorts” more natural female creation: “The nature Victor penetrated in the creation of his monster was a female nature; the act he performed was a sexual act; and it is the distorted image of this nature and this act that helps to make the monster a figure for Mary Shelley’s creation (69). Yet Shelley is also careful to cite original female corruption: the female prototype, monstrous Eve to the monstrous Adam, offers the potential for endless sin and destruction and has no ability to voice
intentions to the contrary. Though Cottom insists that “within the novel’s final retreat from the
darker regions of creation there is the central figure of a woman who is partially made and then
torn apart” (Cottom, 69), the dismembering of the second experiment seems not a “retreat from
the darker regions of creation” but an acknowledgement that darkness underlies any creation
with unpredictable results. As the female always adds an extra layer of unknowability, the
creation of a female is even more monstrous than the creation of a male.

Questions

1. Cottom writes that the monster overturns “the foundation of society in the family” (64). Is the
family sphere already fraught before the monster’s arrival? What role does the family play in
Frankenstein? How does the domestic realm that Shelley portrays differ from other Victorian
conceptions of family and home?

2. Do Frankenstein’s narrative form and the monster’s bodily form fragment representation in the
same way? Think of the monster’s narrative, which recounts the tale of Safie and the De Laceys
within the tale of the monster’s rise to consciousness, as recounted by Frankenstein, as written in
Walton’s letter. Do these formal layers affect the way we view the monster, mirroring the
conglomeration of too-large parts that frightens and overwhelms?

My eyeballs were starting from their sockets in attending to the details of my employment. The
dissecting room and the slaughterhouse furnished many of my materials; and often did my
human nature turn with loathing from my occupation, whilst, still urged on by an eagerness
which perpetually increased, I brought my work near to a conclusion. [Frankenstein, 36-37]

Sometimes I tried to imitate the pleasant songs of the birds, but was unable. Sometimes I wished
to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke
from me frightened me into silence again. [Frankenstein, 81]

The only way to fathom the Creature’s appearance, which is more a rhetorical effect than a
natural fact, is to comprehend how it was made. For Frankenstein, putting together and
dismembering are one. The parts he chooses are beautiful, but they are monstrous in conjunction
— or, rather, since the Creature lacks a phenomenological center, in their absolute disjunction.
Frankenstein is similarly unbalanced, a confused collectivity. . . Any representation of the
creative process, whether the novel’s narrative or my analytic account, is bound to distort the
experience of the whole self” [Sherwin, 896]

In this novel driven by a monster’s frustration and rage at his own disgust (“Why did you form a
monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust?” [105]), how does self-disgust
operate? Are acts of creation inherently fragmenting? Does the creator always become what he
or she creates?

Does the concern over representation as storytelling — Walton’s anxious letters, Frankenstein’s
editing of his own history, the monster’s account of Felix and Safie as a substitute for his own
history — mirror other Victorian narratives or mark a turning away from them? Does the very
presence of an Other corrupt the capacities of language and spur the impulse to tell one’s story, even as the “telling” becomes increasingly impossible?

References

