

‘Filthy creation’: the Problem of Parenting in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to bolster the relevance of Mary Shelley’s classic *Frankenstein* by engaging contemporary bioethical discourses on procreation and parenting. It claims that, besides being a celebrated science fiction for the last two centuries, the novel bears pensive suggestions on parenthood. Exploring the ways in which the creature suffers in the hands of its creator, the paper argues that *Frankenstein* anticipates the need for an ethics of parenthood. The paper discusses the deficiency in Frankenstein’s parenting, as it seeks to reread his position vis-à-vis his creation. In recent times, parenthood and procreation have been a major bioethical concern. By presenting the views of contemporary philosophers on parenthood, the paper unfolds Shelley’s ingenuity in staging the disturbing ramifications of imprudent parenting on children as early as in the nineteenth century. The paper, hence, is an effort to underscore the contemporaneity of Shelley’s ideas on parental choices which she proficiently enfold in the narrative of a gothic fiction.

Keywords: Frankenstein, Mary Shelley, parenting, bioethics, procreation.

1. Introduction

Lisa Cassidy in her essay “That Many of Us Should Not Parent” discusses the possibilities of making ethical decisions when the society lets you treat motherhood as a choice and not a mandatory category to fulfil. She says that Women’s liberation movements have concentrated on the elimination of compulsory motherhood so as to let them acquire greater control on their lives. However, what remains unaddressed is ‘the ethical implication of procreation from a child’s perspective’ (Cassidy, 2006). This suggests that, instead of asking how the child’s existence is going to affect the parent, the potential parent should reflect on how her/his parenting would affect the potential child (p.43). This shows that we have come a long way in developing an ethics of parenthood—pondering upon ‘how parents and children ought to treat each other at the different stages of this uncommonly long and uncommonly powerful relationship (Richards, 2010, p.3). By means of this paper, I seek to highlight the fact that, most discussions on parenthood implicitly bypass the involvement of the male parent in childcare and nurturing. Similarly, discussion on pregnancies occurring to unwed parents primarily encircles the unwed mother. Her trespassing is morally culpable as her ‘sin’ is more visible; the unwed father is a lesser rule-breaker in this case as his distancing from the situation is comparatively more convenient (Pfuhl Jr., 1978). Proving herself to be far ahead of her time, Mary Shelley, as early as in 1818, addressed this gendered discourse on parenthood in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*.

It is evident that Mary Shelley authored *Frankenstein* with a major scepticism towards the cult of imagination, immensely glorified by the Romantics. Their profound imaginative contemplation led them to believe that they—as poets and artists— had a prophetic role to play in this world, besides their political and educative obligations. With their abysmal imaginative skills, the artists bore the potential to create an engineered world—a sartorial place simulating the artist’s imaginative and creative perfection. However, the problem with such a world is its detachment from its moral and ethical repercussions. Needless to say, that Shelley’s novel primarily deals with the aftermath of this detachment. Mary Shelley might have also been influenced by her husband’s reading of the Enlightenment philosophers—Denis Diderot and Jean Jacque Rousseau (Stripling, 2005). Whereas the former defended human passion, the latter rejected the notion that scientific progress increases human happiness (p.15). One of the major Enlightenment ideas that influenced Mary Shelley while writing *Frankenstein* is that parents should adequately bond with their children and men should stop brutalising their children, servants and wives (p.16). This may justify Shelley’s detailed narration of the monster’s tragic condition caused due to parental negligence. Many critics have dealt with Shelley’s portrayal of the consequences of thoughtless scientific pursuits which tamper with the laws of nature (Sherwin, 1981; Ziolkowski, 1981). Victor’s disruption of the natural process of procreation has been identified and vividly discussed in numerous essays and major critical works (Gilbert, 1978; Shaw, 2000; Rubenstein, 1976.). The pervasive Miltonic myth running throughout the novel is echoed in the words of the creature as he helplessly tells his creator: “God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance” (Shelley, 1818/2005, p.155). Critic Leslie Tannenbaum has dexterously mapped and illustrated the Miltonic myth in *Frankenstein*, in his essay—“From Filthy Type to Truth: Miltonic Myth in ‘Frankenstein’” (1977). However, what remains an obvious, but relatively less addressed issue in the novel is Victor Frankenstein’s incompetence as a parent—a designation that deglamourises the scientist who is all set to become God. In this paper, I try to argue that by projecting Victor Frankenstein as a prototype for an incompetent parent, Mary Shelley demands the need of ethics in parenthood. It may be said that Victor’s parental incompetence has its roots in the traditional arrangement of gender roles in our society; here man is the breadwinner and woman is the nurturer. In an article titled “Caring Fathers and Gender (In)Equality?” Hana Marikova states that men and women do not enjoy the same position of power in parenthood; the man has a ‘greater manoeuvring space for his choice’—he does not *have to* provide care to the child; though he may do so if he wishes to (2008, p.143). Marikova also claims that a greater involvement of the father in child-care may help to erode the cultural and social inequalities between men and women (p.135). My aim is to delineate how *Frankenstein* anticipates the need to make ‘nurturing’ a gender-neutral notion and assess parenting from the child’s perspective. The relevance of this two-century old text is augmented by the fact that it envisages issues which entreat attention and deliberation in present times.

2. Victor Frankenstein as an imprudent parent

By means of her novel, Mary Shelley brings up some of her deepest anxieties—ethical consequences of unbridled scientific inquisitiveness and medical experiments being the most prominent ones. *Frankenstein*, in spite of its antiquity, anticipates the bioethical consequences of modern medical developments like genetic engineering and embryo modification. However, it may be stated that her aim is not only to critique the use of the newly found science and technology; her work is also a subtle comment on the lack of accountability in the creator—who

may be a scientist or a parent—towards his creation. Victor Frankenstein is at fault not for creating a horrendous creature, but for refusing to take its responsibility. By calling the scientist's 'filthy creation' as his son, Shelley gives a domestic context to his crisis. Besides being the erratic scientist who deranges the axioms of nature, Victor also emerges as the irresponsible father who evades his parental responsibility.

Victor's unsettled disposition concerning his creation is intuited in the very atmosphere of his laboratory. Mary Shelley may not provide us with the particularities of a chemical laboratory as expected in traditional science fiction, but what we must not miss is her depiction of the moral implications of his clandestine research. The tiny attic—hidden from the eyes of the outer world, the inclement weather, the room grimly lit by the insufficient light of the candle—anticipates the illegitimacy of the affair. He has been frantically pursuing his goal to create life out of the remains of the dead—an enterprise which carries an eerie feeling with it. He says: "With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet" (Shelley, 1818/2005, p.84). Even before his creation came to life, Victor's abhorrence towards it is evident. He is aware of the subhuman stature of it as he refers to it as a 'thing'. Finally, the gestation period gives way to the moment of confrontation between the father and his child. Victor says:

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips. (Shelley, 1818/2005, p. 85)

As his child—more commonly termed as 'the creature' and later 'the monster'—gains the spark of life, Frankenstein immediately realises the horror of the situation that he has created out of no cultural or biological compulsion. His contempt towards the newborn child is so strong that at their very first encounter, he brazenly calls it 'the wretch'. His errant behaviour can hardly be explained or justified; as Laura Claridge states that "Victor Frankenstein's role as father is intensified by that fulfilment of every parent's dream: he can deliberately, knowingly create his child; he can actually choose the parts. It is especially ironic, then, that he hates what he sees" (Claridge, 1985, p.20).

"To have a child is to undertake a solemn obligation; if the mother shirks this duty subsequently, she commits an offense against an existent, independent human being" (Beauvoir, 1952/1993). This statement implies that, the nurturing and 'mothering' of an infant is significantly a mother's duty. The same has widely been accepted in our societies as well. However, what our societies do not specify is the consequence faced by fathers who reject their children. Bypassing the natural process of procreation, Frankenstein becomes God as well as father to his 'creature'—as he prefers calling it by this name. As long as he carries out the process of 'giving birth' in his laboratory, he holds on to the position of God. But, as soon as the creature comes to life, he immediately turns into a naïve father who is clueless about the ugliness of the newborn child—as if it was supposed to be otherwise! His son's apparent ugliness disgusts him so much that he abandons it without even giving it a name.

As the world is witnessing its spectacular technological evolution, bioethics—which is the study of the ethical issues raised by technological advancements in medicine and biology—has

emerged as one of the most important philosophical considerations. Among the bioethical concerns raised by *Frankenstein*, ethics of parenthood is of substantial perturbation. In her essay – “That Many of Us Should Not Parent”, Lisa Cassidy discusses the arguments of Laura Purdy and Adrienne Asch regarding parental choices. Purdy proposes that people who have any chances of passing on hereditary diseases like the Huntington’s disease (which is a major ailment which causes the death of the brain cells), should consciously abstain from having biological children (Purdy, 1996). According to her, it is the primary duty of the parents to ensure that their offspring is born with good health. If the parents know that the child might not lead a ‘minimally satisfying life’, their decision to not procreate may save their potential child from leading a miserable life. This argument then is also applicable to parenting children with disabilities. However, Asch argues against Purdy as she feels that most of the problems that disabled children face in the society are due to social stereotyping. The very notions of ‘ability’ and ‘disability’ are social constructs and thus can be questioned (Asch 1989). Hence it is unethical to abort children with disabilities, even if the parents have prior knowledge of it. Purdy as well as Asch are correct in their own ways. Given the fact that Victor Frankenstein was already aware of the abhorrence of his unnatural gestation, he could have taken the situation back in control by aborting the very idea of giving life to ‘the thing’ that ‘lay at his feet’. That would be Purdy’s way of fulfilling parental responsibility: by *not* becoming one. On the other hand, to go by Asch’s concept, rejection of the child solely because of its ugliness is not justified at all because our notion of beauty is socially conditioned. As a parent, the father could have definitely helped the child, as well as himself, to overcome this prejudice. In case of the ‘creature’, this was far more expected as his ugliness was something that initially appeared beautiful to Victor as he had actually ‘chosen his parts’. In that case, one wonders, why did not Victor take the minimum effort to make his creature more human and less horrifying? His horror at the living creature is only a repetition of a thought that had already visited him before as he recalls: “I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then” (Shelley 1818/2005, 86). All the misery that the creature faces then onwards has its genesis in the initial rejection by the parent. As Victor had technically ‘given birth’ to his child, he was its mother too! So Victor is the only parent who is responsible for the ‘uncanny’ birth of his child and for all the hatred that it faces throughout its life.

Laura Claridge, while probing into the possible reasons behind the ugliness of the creature states that Victor might have imagined such a detestable appearance for his child as an expression of his belligerent feelings towards his own parents. The creature’s ugliness only made it easier for Victor to dread it and run away from his duties and responsibilities as a parent (Claridge, 1985, p.20). Victor’s incompetence as a parent is further evident in his constant deliberation on how the creature has spoiled his life forever, rather realising that he had whimsically brought a life into this world and then cruelly rejected it. Listening to the tragic tale of the creature, his fatherly sympathy does emerge for some time when he says: “I felt what the duties of a creator towards his creature were, and that I ought to render him happy before I complained of his wickedness” (Shelley, 1818/2005, p. 128). Victor further realises: “His tale, and the feelings he now expressed, proved him to be a creature of fine sensations; and did I not, as his maker, owe him all the portion of happiness that it was in my power to bestow?”(p.170). The creature’s fine rhetoric impresses Victor for the time being. However, he soon comes back to his previous stage of rejection as he fails to empathise with the tortured psyche of his child. Gradually, the space for exchanging their thoughts keeps reducing and in the final chapters of the novel, both the father and his child are on a mission to kill one another. Ellen Moers rightly puts it: “Most of the novel—two of the three volumes, can be said to deal with the retribution visited upon the monster and creator for deficient infant care” (Claridge, 1985, p. 17).

Feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick in her book *Maternal Thinking: Towards a politics of peace* suggests guidelines on how primary care should be administered upon a child (1989). She says that a mother should first “preserve their children by meeting their basic needs, then nurture them by meeting their psychological and emotional needs, and finally prepare them for inclusion in the social world in which they live” (Cassidy, 2006, p. 47). As I have argued before, Victor fails his creation as a parent at the first two stages as he makes no attempt at preserving him or catering to his emotional and psychological needs. In fact, Victor—the parent—is the first person to opine that he is ugly, hence reprehensible: “Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch” (Shelley, 1818/2005, p.86). The third stage as defined by Ruddick is the one where the parent prepares the child to adjust itself to the society where it lives. In case of the creature, its father has provided it with a look which the society typifies as ugly and abhorrent. Hence, it has literally no ‘place’ in the society. The first crime committed by the creature was not an instinctive one, but because of the pain caused when he was detested by a prejudiced child. He complains of his loneliness as he says: “Yet even that enemy of God and man had friends and associates in his desolation; I am quite alone” (p. 242). As all his attempts to be a part of the human society fails, the creature asks Victor to “create a female for me, with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being” (p. 168). Although Victor’s residual sense of parental duty urges him to initiate the process of creating the female companion, he feels a greater obligation towards the human society that might be jeopardised at the emergence of this abhorrent species when they procreate. Hence he destroys the half-made companion—an act that further enrages the creature. Whereas Victor’s nature had an inherent love for solitude, his creature dearly longed to be a part of a social community. Victor’s incompetence leaves the creature homeless, friendless and with the sole motive to destroy every possible cause of Victor’s happiness, consequently destroy Victor himself.

Victor Frankenstein—from the bioethical perspectives provided by Purdy, Asch and Ruddick—is an incompetent parent who shirks from his responsibility by either putting the blame on his father or on his son! Victor was initially discouraged by his father to pursue his interest in the works of Cornelius Agrippa. However, Victor laments that:

If, instead of this remark, my father had taken the pains to explain to me, that the principles of Agrippa had been entirely exploded, and that a modern system of science had been introduced, which possessed much greater powers than the ancient, because the powers of the latter were chimerical, while those of the former were real and practical; under such circumstances, I should certainly have thrown Agrippa aside, and, with my imagination warmed as it was, should probably have applied myself to the more rational theory of chemistry which has resulted from modern discoveries. It is even possible, that the train of my ideas would never have received the fatal impulse that led to my ruin. (p. 68).

Lacking care and guidance since its very inception, the creature realises that it needs to *instruct* its father to meet its emotional and social needs. Hence there is an inversion in the father-son relationship as evident in U. C. Knoepfelmacher’s observation: “The monster becomes father to the man and relentlessly imposes on its creator the same conditions of dependence and insecurity that it was made to suffer” (Claridge, 1985, p. 22). As the creature forces Victor to pursue him in the Arctic region, he says that Victor will face the same cold and frost as he had imposed on his child—so much so that now he is impassive to it (Shelley, 1818/2005, p. 227). As a parent, it was Victor’s duty to care for the child and nurture it in spite of all odds. What makes a monster out of

the creature is not its devilish appearance, but its deep sense of isolation caused by parental incompetence. Victor confesses to Walton that he created the 'rational creature' in a 'fit of enthusiastic madness' and therefore was bound to have some duties towards its well being (p.238). However, it is the creature who reminds Victor that he is its creator and tells him: "Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind" (p. 125). It is only with the creature's first murder, Victor realises that he was the 'true murderer' to be blamed (p. 115). The creature was merely an external manifestation of the nightmarish ambition within Victor.

Shelley writes in her preface that her chief concern had been to 'exhibit the amiableness of domestic affection' and the 'excellence of universal virtues' (p. 47). However, in her novel, she draws attention to this theme by showing the very absence of domestic affection between Victor and his creature. Victor is the 'maniacal yet detached scientist' who keeps a safe physical as well as emotional distance between himself and the creature (Stripling, 2005, p.21). This detachment prevents him from empathising with his creation. As a creator, who had no biological ties with the child, it is only empathy that could have enabled him to understand the creature's misery. In her essay-"Parent-child tensions in 'Frankenstein: the search for communion'", Laura Claridge states that "In Shelley's attention to parent-child relationships, she implies a far-ranging application to society at large: if we fail at this most primal unit of communication, what hope is there for compassionate interaction with the larger community?"(Claridge, 1985, p. 15)

Victor had started off with the noble intention of creating a new species of perfect beings that, by putting an end to mortality, would bring pride to their creator. Before the creature came to life, he took great pride in his creation—"No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve their's" (Shelley, 1818/2005, p.82). However, his nameless son becomes nothing but a disappointment to the over-expectant patriarch within him. Neither does the child have a mother who could help him to cope with the hatred of the father. Victor forgets that his child had no one to fall back upon if he rejects him. He fails to be a true creator, as he fails to be a mother to the child. His distorted idea of procreation does not give birth to the nurturer in him, which usually is the 'natural' way gestation works. From being an over-ambitious scientist, he is reduced to an insensitive, inept parent who could only give his child a life of emotional, social and psychological desolation.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to argue that by means of a flawed protagonist, who is also a deficient father—Mary Shelley critiques the lopsidedness in our conception of parenthood. By providing us with the perspectives of the creator as well as the creature, she anticipates contemporary bioethical issues of parenting. The failed father-son relationship emphasises the fact that parenting should be a well thought decision. Besides other constitutional weaknesses, stereotyped gender roles might also be the reason behind Frankenstein's lack of empathy towards his child. The immense suffering of the creature due to insufficient infant-care necessitates the need to increase the moral responsibility of the male parent in nurturing the child. In so doing, the paper also questions if parental morality needs to be legally enforced to protect the rights of the child. In her detailed exploration of the monster's side of the story—accounts of the suffering it goes through due to Victor's 'enthusiastic madness'—Shelley draws our attention towards the effect of incompetent parenting on children. Although *Frankenstein* gained popularity in its time as a science fiction, its bioethical dimension attunes it to our present day. Thus multidisciplinary readings of the novel may help us to reinvent the classic time and again.

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