First Name Last Name

English Composition II

*Frankenstein* Literature Analysis Essay

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Nature vs. Nurture in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

The argument over whether nature or nurture is responsible for a person’s development and behavior is an enduring question that is centuries old. The nature vs. nurture debate is at the forefront of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Through her creature, Shelley examines whether a person is born evil and malicious or if he gradually becomes that way because of life experiences. While Frankenstein and the creature each have distinct natures, both are nurtured differently. Some may argue that their natures differs as much as the way they were, or weren’t, nurtured; however, the creature is human, like Frankenstein, based on his genotype; although abnormal and not typically classified in any human species category, the creature is still social with a distinct need of acceptance, validation, and companionship. In Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, Shelley adequately supports the notion that nurture presides over nature because while the creature is kind and benevolent at first, Frankenstein’s lack of proper nurturing and society’s constant shunning turn him evil, much like the current debate over bullying in schools.

Shelley begins by having Frankenstein describe to Walton just how he came to study anatomy and the causes of life and death leading up to his ultimate discovery, recollecting, “After days and nights of incredible labour and fatigue, I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter” (Shelley 49). Frankenstein goes on to expound upon his genius and believes his creation 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 theirs” (51). Yet, when Frankenstein gives life to his creature, something he has toiled for and looked forward to for two years, he forsakes the creature, recalling, “now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room” (56). Frankenstein abandons his creature, leaving the creature to fend for himself having not taught him the basic life lessons every child learns from a parent: eating and drinking, letters and numbers, and speaking and reading. The creature must learn these things for himself and must embark on his own quest for human knowledge, starting a resentment inside him he cannot understand as yet. The creature finds himself lonely and confused and recalls how he felt after leaving Frankenstein’s house saying, “I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but, feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept” (118). In their article regarding nature and nurture, Reif, Rösler, Freitag, Schneider, Eujen, Kissling, Wenzler, Jacob, Retz-Junginger, Thome, Lesch, and Retz agree in that studies have shown “oppositional and aggressive behavior in childhood is predictive of according offensive, aggressive and antisocial behavior in adulthood, as are adverse family circumstances like childhood maltreatment” (2375-76). Frankenstein’s inability to nurture his creation, therefore, plants the seed of evil in the creature that begins to fester and grow as the creature is treated poorly by society.

Similarly, the people of society treat the creature atrociously. In stumbling across a village, the creature is happy to see others like him, but the villagers see him and immediately shun him, as the creature recounts: “children shrieked, and one of the women fainted. The whole village was roused; some fled, some attacked me, until, grievously bruised by stones and many other kinds of missile weapons, I escaped” (Shelley 122). Miraculously, even having been treated so horribly by the villagers, when the next day the creature happens upon the DeLacy family living in a cottage in the woods, he is captivated by them. At first, he steals food from them, but after learning about their poverty, how little stores they have, and how hard they have to work, he sympathizes with their plight, abstains from stealing food, and chops their wood for them to lighten their work load. The creature, craving their love and acceptance, risks making contact with the blind father, only to be happened upon by the children when “Agatha fainted; and Safie, unable to attend to her friend, rushed out of the cottage. Felix darted forward, and with supernatural force tore me from his father, to whose knees I clung; in a transport of fury, he dashed me to the ground, and struck me violently with a stick” (160). Infuriated with the rejection by the DeLacys and the knowledge they have fled because of him, the creature begins to feel real loss and recalls, “when I reflected that they had spurned and deserted me, anger returned, a rage of anger, and, unable to injure any thing human, I turned my fury towards inanimate objects” (164). This family the creature loves has rejected him like his own creator, and even when feeling such anger and rage, he still cannot bring himself to hurt a living person.

Furthermore, almost immediately after suffering his loss of the DeLacys, the creature again tries to be altruistic; after hearing a young girl’s voice and realizing she has slipped into the river, he saves her and “endeavored, by every means in my power, to restore animation” (Shelley 167). He is then seen by a man who promptly shoots him as reward for his benevolence. The creature then states, “The feelings of kindness and gentleness, which I had entertained but a few moments before, gave place to hellish rage and gnashing of teeth” (168). Time after time the creature’s good deeds and kindnesses are met with horror, pain, loneliness, and segregation from society. In his article, “Why Nature & Nurture won’t go away,” Steven Pinker writes that “Man is man because he has no instincts, because everything he is and has become he has learned…from his culture, from the man-made part of the environment, from other human beings” (7). Frankenstein and society have taught the creature that he is horrid, a wretch, and not worthy of human existence by their actions, or in his case, Frankenstein’s inaction in not properly nurturing his creation. The creature does not commit any reprehensible crime until all these lessons have taken place. Only then does he happen to encounter William, and seeing him as innocent and unprejudiced, he plans to keep him as a companion; however, upon finding out who his family is, the creature destroys him and states, “my heart swelled with exultation and hellish triumph; clapping my hands, I exclaimed, ‘I, too, can create desolation; my enemy is not impregnable; this death will carry despair to him, and a thousand other miseries shall torment and destroy him’” (Shelley 170). His revenge against his creator has just begun.

In present day society, nature vs. nurture is still debated in schools as to what really causes a child to become a bully. Is it that he/she is predisposed to aggressive behavior genetically or is this learned behavior? Most science points to it being a combination of factors, one’s propensity towards violence; however, Pinker explains that that no one is a blank slate stating, “All behavior is the product of an inextricable interaction between heredity and environment during development, so the answer to all nature-nurture questions is ‘some of each’” (6). Bullies manipulate others by means of physical and emotional threats and use aggressive actions and words to achieve their end game, whether that is domination of another or just getting their way. Studies have shown that two hormones, testosterone and cortisol, may be responsible for increased aggression; however, these studies also showed that “testosterone-related behaviors were dependent on the quality of parent-child relations and not on a direct relationship between testosterone and behavior” (Hazler, Carney, and Granger 301). Similar studies in girls yielded similar results.

Consequently it seems, even by today’s science, that nurture presides over nature in one’s predisposition toward violent behavior. Frankenstein’s creature doesn’t really have a genetic map one could study to determine his genetic predisposition for violence as there is no uniformity or predictability that can be gathered from each of the creature’s body parts. He has many biological parents; however, the rejection by his creator, his father, and the subsequent shunning by society teach him that he is a lesser being, and this nurtures rage, anger, and evil within him, causing him to commit heinous acts in the name of revenge. No matter what genetic association the creature may or may not have, genetics can only “convey a statistical predisposition toward a certain behavior” (Reif, Rösler, Freitag, Schneider, Eujen, Kissling, Wenzler, Jacob, Retz-Junginger, Thome, Lesch, and Retz 2381); it does not exculpate them from wrongdoing. They should have been taught right from wrong and impulse control. The creature, sadly, has no chance to be good. Frankenstein does not give him the chance.

The theme of nature vs. nurture runs throughout Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, from the nature of Victor Frankenstein and his desire to be adored by a species of his own creation, to his inability to nurture a creature he created that he abandons to a hellish life on earth with a society abuses and shuns him. As the creature has no real nature, being that it is made from several different body parts, there can be no real genetic predisposition toward violence. The creature learns this from the environment he is thrown into by his creator. Abandonment and neglect by his father and abuse and rejection by society teach the creature he is wretched. Time after time the creature tries to be kind, generous, and compassionate to those he encounters, only to be rebuffed, rebuked, and harmed. This stokes the evil within him with rage and anger and causes him to become evil and malevolent, much like adverse parental rearing is, in part, blamed for today’s bullies in schools. That this issue is still debated today is a testament to the timelessness of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein.*

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