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“If I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear”: Reading the Creature’s Development Through Godwin’s Educational Theory in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

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Mikaela Huang

Our moral dispositions and character depend very much, perhaps entirely, upon education.

William Godwin, *An Account of the Seminary*

Being the daughter of the early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft and the radical philosopher William Godwin, Mary Shelley felt the burden of carrying on her parents’ legacies. In particular, both of her parents emphasized the formative power of education and intellectual pursuit. Shelley, like many women of nineteenth century Britain, was not educated in a public institution; instead, her own curiosity and feverish perusal of books inspired her education. This type of desire-driven education, motivated exclusively by her enthusiasm to acquire knowledge, is fundamental to her father’s educational theory, which argues that a pupil’s motivation to learn needs to arise from his or her own desires.

In addition to the pupil’s desire to learn, Godwin also stresses that society is an indispensable aspect of education because it allows the youth to practice his or her learned virtue. Though Shelley read and studied much on her own in her educational pursuits, she by no means received her education in isolation. Intellectual and philosophical devotees such Percy Shelley and Samuel Taylor Coleridge often visited her father in the privacy of her home. Her own arduous study, driven by desire and constant contact with keen intellects, contributed significantly to Shelley’s intellectual development. This led to the conception of her literary and historical masterpiece, *Frank-*

enstein, at an early age.

Learning in the company of other intellects became an essential part of Shelley's own intellectual pursuits from an early age. Accordingly, she positions the Creature in *Frankenstein* to learn in social isolation to illustrate the detriments of private tutoring. Abandoned by his creator upon animation, the Creature learns to distinguish between his bodily senses while foraging alone in nature. Once his rudimentary education in nature is completed, he discreetly observes complex societal constructions and values from benevolent cottagers. Concealed within his hovel, the Creature learns to distinguish between virtue and vice and understands that the brutal treatment he received from the villagers results from his appearance. The tender exchanges and loving relationships between the cottagers also incite the Creature to yearn for companionship. He helps the cottagers by supplying wood and material needs and develops a plan to eventually reveal himself. Once rejected, however, the Creature abandons all practices of virtue and resorts to causing fear to humanity, which he deems responsible for his condition. By positioning the Creature in *Frankenstein* as an individual whose vicious practices result from solitude, Shelley, like her father, also stresses the importance of society in education and the development of virtue.

Despite acknowledging Shelley's own arduous pursuit of education, critics predominantly overlook Godwin's influence and argue that, as far as the Creature's development in *Frankenstein* is concerned, Shelley draws heavily on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's educational philosophy. In *Emile*, Rousseau argues youths should be educated more or less in isolation, so as to retain their natural inclination towards benevolence. The critics argue

that everything good within the Creature comes from nature and that “everything evil [comes from ...] the hostility and prejudice he meets at the hands of men” (Lipking 428). Ron Broglio claims that Shelley’s depiction of the Creature’s educational experience reflects Rousseau’s notion that human nature is most pure and virtuous apart from society. Rousseau argues for individuals to be educated privately by a tutor, who carefully arranges “natural” experiences from which the pupil can learn. The pupil should also be educated more or less in isolation as to not be exposed to society’s vice. These critics who support the Rousseauvian influence presume that the Creature has been educated in social isolation. They also neglect the fact that the Creature’s acquaintance with humanity includes benevolence as well as vice, such as the mild, tender, and loving manners displayed by the cottagers. The Creature gravitates towards the benevolent disposition of the cottagers as he discreetly observes them. Through his observations, the Creature also learns the value of language and education, which excites his curiosity to acquire language and to learn from various texts.

I argue, then, that had the Creature not learned the value of language through observing the conversation of the De Lacey family first, he would not have the desire to glean information from various texts. The De Lacey family’s ability to converse and share empathy ignites the Creature’s desire to learn, which reflects Godwin’s desire-driven education rather than Rousseau’s educational philosophy. However, the Creature did not directly interact with his peers as Godwin would have preferred, ultimately leading the Creature to abandon virtue for the practice of vice. Shelley’s depiction of the Creature’s educational environment and circumstances closely resem-

bles Emile's, but, in the portrayal of the Creature's education process, she ultimately exemplifies Godwin's advocacy for desire-driven education and criticism of private education. Shelley, like Godwin, criticizes private tutoring due to its inability to develop self-esteem and cultivate the ability to act virtuously within the pupil; according to Godwin's theory, privately tutored individuals are unable to overcome societal temptation and have no opportunity to gradually acclimate and defend themselves against society's vice.

Granted, the contrived process of the Creature's education does reflect an aspect of Rousseau's philosophy. At first, the Creature, apart from society, seems to be Shelley's version of Rousseau's Emile. Rousseau gives Emile a tutor who contrives natural opportunities for him to learn through personal experiences. Like that of Emile, the Creature's educational development process unfolds by means of a process carefully controlled by the author, which, in a sense, makes Shelley the Rousseauvian "tutor" who orchestrates the "natural" opportunities for the Creature to learn. In *Emile*, Rousseau states that "It is not [the tutor's] business to teach [the pupil] the various sciences, but to give him a taste for them and methods of learning them when this taste is more mature. That is assuredly a fundamental principle of all good education" (135-136). Essentially, Rousseau argues that a pupil needs to learn by experience and not to be taught directly by a tutor. In *Frankenstein*, the Creature does not have a tutor but learns through his experiences in nature and with humanity in a logical and contrived manner. The circumstances through which the Creature learns make it hard for the reader to negate Shelley's presence. First, the Creature, abandoned by Frankenstein, wanders alone in nature and learns to distinguish his senses through

experiencing hunger, thirst, lethargy, and various temperatures. Shelley then tactfully arranges for the Creature to be exposed only to magnanimous cottagers; she positions him within a fertile environment to cultivate his moral disposition. Once literate, the Creature chances upon various texts to exercise his judgment. Shelley, as his private tutor, carefully selects texts such as *The Sorrow of Young Werther*, *Paradise Lost*, and Plutarch's *Lives*, to encourage the Creature to develop empathy and "ardour for virtue [...] and abhorrence for vice" (90). Shelley's contrived scenarios in the development of the Creature's education seems to mimic that of Emile's experience with his tutor. Both Emile and the Creature learn through their experiences, and they are both unaware that their experiences are delicately controlled by an external party.

Despite the Rousseauvian influence, however, Shelley's portrayal of the Creature's educational pursuit only after his awareness of its value reflects Godwin's philosophy of desire-driven education. Whereas the pupil's development in Rousseau's philosophy depends entirely on the tutor's constant involvement in every aspect of the pupil's experience, the pupil's development in Godwin's philosophy relies on the pupil's disposition. As a result, Godwin's theory allots more agency to the pupil than Rousseau's. In *The Enquirer*, Godwin claims that "[t]he most desirable mode of education [...] is] that all the acquisitions of the pupil shall be preceded and accompanied by desire. The best motive to learn, is a perception of the value of the thing learned," which can be "intrinsic" or "extrinsic" in nature (63). In desire-driven education, an individual must perceive the "intrinsic motive" or the "extrinsic motive" within education. Intrinsic motive is the discovery

of the inherent, unchangeable, and natural value of something. The Creature is first motivated to learn based on his awareness of the intrinsic value of language. Through his observation of the De Lacey family, the Creature recognizes the advantages language affords: he “found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds [...] the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenance of the hearers” (77). The Creature concludes that language gives the De Lacey family the ability to communicate emotions and to elicit empathy from one another. This intrinsic quality of language excites his desire to acquire it. The intrinsic value of language, which the Creature perceives, is the ability to articulate feelings and thoughts to another being. In accordance to Godwin’s educational philosophy, the Creature only needs to understand that language acquisition will benefit him to excite his desire in acquiring this skill.

After his initial excitement, the Creature’s arduous work in language acquisition results from extrinsic motive, another significant factor in Godwin’s philosophy of desire-driven education. Learning that is excited by an extrinsic motive is also due to the perceived value of the learned object, but its perceived value arises “from the accidental attractions which [...] may have [been] annexed to it” (63). The perceived value from the extrinsic motive is the benefit attached to the object that does not arise from the object’s constant and inherent characteristics. Although the desire to acquire language skills initially comes from the Creature’s acknowledgment of the value of language, his later arduous study is motivated by an extrinsic value that the Creature assumes to be a benefit of language acquisition. The

Creature believes that language acquisition could earn him the cottagers' acceptance and affection, which excites his desire to learn. After a period of observation and admiration of the cottagers' benevolent dispositions, the Creature desires to "first win their favour, and afterwards their love" (79). The Creature proclaims, "[t]hese thoughts exhilarated me, and led me to apply with fresh ardour to the acquiring the art of language" (79). The Creature associates the cottagers' affection as a benefit that can result from language acquisition. This extrinsically attached value motivates the Creature to vigorously pursue the art of language, which results in his ability to admire virtue and disdain vice. Both the intrinsic and extrinsic learning motives further the growth of the Creature's character and mind.

Shelley further exemplifies Godwin's educational philosophy in the Creature's ability to recognize "the self" as separate from society and not imbued by its vain prejudices. Godwin's philosophy presumes that desire-driven education, regardless of the intrinsic or extrinsic nature of the pupil's motivation, engages the mind and renders the pupil a rational individual. This individual can then formulate opinions that are unaffected by society's preconceived notions. In *The Enquirer*, Godwin asserts that "the pure and genuine condition of a rational being" is to have one's education governed by intrinsic and extrinsic motives. Exercising the mind in this manner "elevates us with a sense of independence. It causes a man to stand alone, and is the only method by which he can be rendered truly an individual, the creature, not of implicit faith, but of his own understanding (62). Here Godwin claims that learning through desire is the precursor for becoming a "rational being" who is capable of formulating his or her

own identity. Because the Creature has undergone Godwin's desire-driven education, which motivates him to continually exercise his mind, he is a "rational being" in the Godwinian sense. Despite the realization that the villagers perceive him as a monster due to his appearance, the Creature judges himself independently from their opinion. When he finally approaches the blind, elderly De Lacey, the Creature tells him that "I have good dispositions; my life has been hitherto harmless, and in some degree, beneficial; but a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable Creature" (93). The Creature's understanding of himself does not conform to social standards as practiced by various villagers he encounters. Instead, it derives from his understanding of virtues learned from his study. This desire-driven education allows the Creature to gain a true sense of individuality and thus fashions for himself an identity not dependent on society's preconceived notions.

Despite having fashioned a strong sense of identity, the Creature's willingness to compromise his own self-worth to gain the De Lacey family's acceptance exemplifies Godwin's criticism of private tutoring. Whereas Rousseau advocates for individual tutoring away from society, Godwin thinks that "[t]he pupil of private education is [...] chiefly anxious about how he shall appear [...] and] too often continues for the remainder of his life timid, incapable of a ready self-possession" (*The Enquirer* 135). In this critique, Godwin claims that a privately tutored individual preoccupies him or herself with the image that is perceived by society at large. This preoccupation, when left unchecked, can lead the individual to compromise his or her identity in order to be accepted in a certain social circle. Shelley's

Creature, in his desperation to share in the companionship of the cottagers, purposefully presents an ideal image of himself to them. He imagines that “when they should become acquainted with my *admiration of their virtues*, they would compassionate me, and overlook my personal deformity... I resolved...in every way to *fit* myself for an interview with them” (91, emphasis added). Instead of presenting his authentic self to the De Lacey family, the Creature attempts to mold, to “fit,” himself into an image that he assumes would be successful in gaining the favor of the cottagers. He wants the De Lacey family to know of his “admiration of their virtue” rather than his own character, magnanimity, and benevolent disposition. Even though the Creature’s admiration is a genuine aspect of himself, the image he wishes to present does not encompass his entire character. Had Shelley’s conception of the Creature’s education been completely influenced by Rousseau, as many critics argue, his developed disposition should remain as unchanged as Emile’s when he enters society.

The Creature’s proclamation that solitude is the chief cause of his downfall also suggests Shelley’s support for Godwin’s claim that society should be part of the educational process. Godwin argues that the continued development of an individual’s moral disposition is entirely dependent on social interactions: “I cannot entertain a generous complacency in myself, unless I find that there are others that set a value on me. I shall feel little temptation to the cultivation of faculties in which no one appears to take an interest” (*The Enquirer* 46). Not only is human society a place for individuals to exercise their virtue, it also serves as a motivator for its continuing development. The Creature, likewise, feels the need for a companion

who is capable of sharing his sensibilities. The Creature pleads with Frankenstein to create a mate for him with the argument that her existence would allow him to continue practicing benevolence:

If I have no ties and no affections, hatred and vice must be my portion [...] *My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor; and my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal.* I shall feel the affections of a sensitive being, and become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which I am now excluded. (103-104, emphasis added)

Unlike the Rousseauvian individual who retains goodness in measured solitude, Shelley's Creature claims that his "vices" derive from "forced solitude" because he lacks the opportunity to participate in a society that practices affection and magnanimity. Essentially, the Creature argues that, not being a part of society, he has no motivation to continue the exercise of his benevolent disposition towards humanity since his physical appearance forces his seclusion.

The Creature's seclusion also makes him ill-prepared for the extent that society practices vice due to its prejudice. Similar to Rousseau, Godwin believes that society can corrupt an innocent individual because of men's tendency to be "treacherous, deceitful and selfish" (51). However, Godwin believes that gradually introducing an individual to society can mitigate this shock and protect an individual's virtue against corruption. If the Creature could have been educated in society, his resistance to society's vice would slowly build and his emotional maturity would gradually develop. Godwin

argues that private education's most fatal effect is introducing its students to society's "temptation unprepared" (51). For Godwin, "temptation" is a traumatic experience. Shelley illustrates the Creature's "temptation" in his encounters with the younger De Lacey members and the two lovers he afterwards meets in the woods. After being rejected by the younger De Lacey members, the Creature feels his benevolent sense of self annihilated. After the cottagers depart out of fear for his presence, he sets fire to the cottage and "bend[s his] mind towards injury and death" (97). The emotional wound he receives at the hands of the cottagers is then compounded by the gunshot wound he sustains from the two lovers. These practices of vice propel him to declare "revenge—a deep and deadly revenge, such as would alone compensate for the outrages and anguish I had endured" (99). Both the younger De Lacey members and the young lovers are blinded by vain prejudices, and their actions to injure the Creature are guided by the need for self-preservation. In this, Shelley exemplifies what Godwin considers to be the temptations of society. Because the Creature manages to shelter himself from all reproach for the duration of his education, he has not developed skills to react appropriately to these temptations.

Shelley's depiction of the Creature's swift change from benevolence to viciousness reflects Godwin's argument against private tutoring. The Creature claims men's vice for himself and triumphs in this appropriation. As opposed to the pupil who receives an education within the public sphere, Godwin claims that privately educated individuals, like Shelley's Creature, are not prepared to "endure suffering with equanimity and courage" (135). Furthermore, Godwin argues that the individual might be inclined to

believe that “the practices of the sensual and corrupt [are] the only practices proper to men” (51). The shock of humanity’s vice to an individual in an isolated upbringing could prove fatal in that he or she foregoes the practice of magnanimity and adopts vicious practices to satisfy his or her own desires. The isolated Creature resorts to finding temporary solace in the practice of violence and vice that he has learned from men. In his first act of murder, the Creature feels his “heart swelled with *exultation* and hellish *triumph*” while he exclaims, “I, too, can create desolation; my enemy is not impregnable” (100, emphasis added). Not only does the Creature take pride in his ability to mimic human transgressions, he exults in his first act of murder. This practice of vice exceeds any violence he has experienced in the hands of men. He retains none of the benevolent disposition and sentiments that have been displayed during his education. Because of the Creature’s change from desiring to practice magnanimity to committing the most heinous crime, Shelley ultimately endorses Godwin’s perspective that private education is inadequate in preparing an individual to be a beneficial part of society.

As critics like Lipking and Broglio have noted, Rousseau’s influence on *Frankenstein* does permeate the novel’s characters and plot, but it does not negate the influence that Shelley’s father had on the conception of the novel. Employing a Rousseauvian reading of the Creature succeeds only in exemplifying Rousseau’s exaltation of nature and criticism of society. It also ignores the multifaceted nature of the Creature’s development. Shelley draws on Rousseau’s comments on human nature and the vice of society, but the conception of the Creature’s education draws on both Rousseau and

Godwin's educational philosophy. The Creature's educational experiences do seem to resemble Emile's, but the mode of education ultimately exemplifies Godwin's desire-driven education. The Creature attains virtue and self-identity, but these characteristics remain untested by society because his education has chiefly taken place outside society. The Creature's subsequent, sudden change from the practice of virtue to vice also further exemplifies Godwin's critique of individual tutoring and ultimately Shelley's endorsement of her father's educational philosophy. Instead of reading *Frankenstein* as an example of unresolved enigmas, as is the case with the Rousseauvian reading, we should take into consideration that perhaps Shelley's unorthodox education provided her with insights into various causes of societal dysfunction exemplified in her masterpiece.

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