



Development of the self in Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* and Jane Austen's

Northanger Abbey

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'Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me' (Shelly 90)

Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* are both Romantic texts that focus on nascent consciousness: Shelly's novel charts the experience of Frankenstein's Creature from creation whilst Austen's follows Catherine Morland's transition into the adult world. This essay will argue that the texts demonstrate that the development of the self comes as a result of an individual's relationships with literature and femininity. It will examine the connections the texts draw between these concepts and development, how their intersection influences the fates of key protagonists, and conclude that the most developed individuals are critical readers who understand and challenge restrictions on feminine autonomy.

Both *Frankenstein* and *Northanger Abbey* highlight the significance of critical engagement in developing one's sense of self. In *Frankenstein*, the Creature begins as a blank slate with no understanding of humanity or himself. However, after observing the De Lacy family, he develops a relationship with literature, claiming that "the words induced me to turn towards myself" (Shelly 83). Crucially, however, this initial period of self-reflection comes from Felix's reading and interpretation of literature – not the Creature's own. He learns of morality, exhibits horror at the thought of murder and believes:

to be a great and virtuous man appeared the highest honour that can befall a sensitive being; base and vicious, as many on record have been, appeared the lowest degradation, a condition more abject than that of the blind mole or harmless worm. (Shelly 83)

Thus, the Creature develops a clear moral code: virtuosity and viciousness exist in direct opposition to one another. To him, breaking this moral code results in one not only being considered unhuman, like the 'mole' or 'worm', but the worst variation - totally lacking in

humanity. However, as he learns the systems of slavery, race, and status, he develops an understanding of his own otherness – as Bugg argues, “he learns the very system that named him monstrous” (661). This is important because it detaches the Creature’s understanding of self from his understanding of humanity – if he is unhuman, is he not equal to the base and vicious? Thus, Frankenstein’s perception of morality develops as he no longer considers himself a ‘man’. Consequently, attributes such as greatness and virtue seem unattainable to the Creature. In contrast to the greatness of man, his lack of perceived humanity renders him the ‘lowest degradation’. To him, it seems impossible to identify with the heroes he perceives in the stories of the De Lacy family.

This journey of self-development is furthered when the Creature stumbles across *Paradise Lost*. He is no longer experiencing literature through another’s voice, but rather engaging with and reading it himself, demonstrating an advancement in critical thinking. Within *Paradise Lost*, the Creature sees himself:

Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me (Shelley 90).

The Creature's association with Satan, rather than Adam, develops from the fact that the Creature has no connection to his creator. He doesn't share the human form and, rather than being free of sin, he is envious of others. His recognition of himself as the devil is crucial to the development of his sense of self because it alters his behaviour: he acts in the image he believes society has created for him. This differs tremendously from his initial ambition to be honourable. Tang Soo Ping presents an alternative argument, claiming that the Creature stands by his initial response to

the literature as his murderous tendencies “never really obscures his Edenic qualities of loving and caring” and that these are qualities which are exhibited in his “grief and horror” following Frankenstein’s death (257). To Ping, this demonstrates an acknowledgement of the evil that is death. I would agree that the Creature’s sense of morality never truly leaves; he understands the inherent flaws in his behaviour and knows that death is something to be grieved, rather than pursued. However, what does change is his sense of self. Because the Creature no longer views himself as human and therefore no longer holds himself to the standards of what he perceives to be human morality, he is able to commit heinous acts in spite of a strong sense of good and evil. Consequently, it is clear that literature - which defined the creature’s understanding of his own humanity - has fundamentally altered the Creature and his behavior.

Like *Frankenstein*, *Northanger Abbey* uses literature to indicate development within characters, particularly within their perception of world. Novels play a frequent part in Catherine’s conversation with her family and friends. Marvin Mudrick argues that Catherine doesn’t engage critically with texts she reads as she is “too simple... to assert the claim of personal feeling and value beyond mere function” (40). This argument is founded upon the idea Catherine misinterprets tropes of gothic literature within her life, leading to poor decisions. Jodi Wyatt, however, rejects this claim, arguing that Catherine’s “initial perceptions are not too far from the truth of her social reality” (268). An examination of the text supports Wyatt’s conclusion. When the General leaves Catherine and Elizabeth to themselves, Catherine feels her “spirits being relieved” (Austen 118). This foreshadows the General’s emergence as a perpetrator of “parental tyranny” (Austen 174). Moreover, Catherine’s obsession with the chest in her room following Henry’s gothic story ultimately leads to her finding evidence of “the most charming man in the world” (Austen 123). On these occasions, Catherine instinctively recognises the

significance of the people and objects around her based upon the conventions of murder and mystery found in her novels. Thus, Catherine's perception of society is more accurate as a result of her relationship with novels – a clear sign of the connection between literature and the development of the self.

John Thorpe represents the impact that a lack of reading can have on the development of the self. To Thorpe, “novels are all so full of nonsense and stuff...they are the stupidest things in creation” (Austen 31). This immediately creates a distance between John and Catherine, who is a voracious reader. Thorpe represents the archetypal view of the Victorian man - one who belittles the novel as a form due to its perceived femininity which, in his eyes, renders it stupid. Austen subtly undermines this view by demonstrating the lack of emotional awareness that John has during his interactions with Catherine. It is John who is established as ‘stupid’ when he tells Isabella that Catherine “received his advances in the kindest way” (Austen 98) despite Catherine obviously acting neutrally towards him and when he misperceives the Morlands’ wealth and status. Thus, it becomes clear that, unlike Catherine, John has a limited understanding of human behaviour and is someone of little intellect. Therefore, his view on the novel is discredited. This portrayal of John is reflective of the lack of self-development that occurs in the absence of the novel and emphasises the value of the form itself.

Catherine's critical reading develops further into an understanding of the gendered relationships within society, influencing her development. This awareness enables her to reclaim a feminine autonomy over her own narrative, facilitating further development of the self. When talking to Henry, she engages critically with his love of history, exposing it as a product of the patriarchy:

the quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men are all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all... a great deal of it must be invention (Austen 74).

Catherine recognises that male voices have dictated the narrative of history, choosing to dramatize the ‘quarrels of popes and kings’ in place of the role women played in the development of society. Fuller believes that, for Catherine, “a revision of the male-authored historical past... leaves open the possibility of a different future” (102). This is important to Catherine’s development because, by recognising the ways in which her autonomy and voice are restricted, she can better combat the men and patriarchal structures who attempt to control her narrative. This skill proves vital to Catherine as it enables her to recognise the dangers of John and the General. The ways in which these two men see their attempts at coercion squandered only occur due to Catherine’s capacity to acknowledge the danger they represent, and then act effectively in opposition to such dangers. This argument is supported further by Linda Gill, who ascertains that Catherine “by the sheer force of her unregulated desire, has instigated and framed” her narrative (37). An examination of Catherine’s refusal to abandon her walk with the Tilneys further substantiates Gill’s point. When John and Isabella attempt to coerce Catherine into coming with them, she tells them “Let me go, Mr Thorpe; Isabella, do not hold me” (Austen 68). Her language is clear and assertive; rather than asking Thorpe to alter his behaviour, as might be expected in a relationship where there is a power imbalance, she is directional. It is on the subsequent walk with Henry Tilney that the couple advance their connection. Had Catherine not prioritised her own voice, her narrative would have developed very differently. Consequently, it is clear that both Catherine’s narrative and sense of self are developed greatly by her

embracement of feminine autonomy. Importantly, this embracement has developed from critical engagement with literature in her life, both fictional and historical. This once again relates the development of Catherine to her relationship with literature, particularly the novel.

In contrast to *Northanger Abbey*, *Frankenstein* sees Victor Frankenstein undermine and restrict femininity. When creating his creature, Victor engages in a “destruction of the female” by replacing her role as the mother when developing the Creature (Mellor 248). This is important because the Creature is therefore the product of exclusively masculine development, and his subsequent actions demonstrate the danger of an entirely masculine self. However, what Victor truly fears is a woman who, like Catherine Morland, refuses to comply with the narrative imposed upon her by men. This can be demonstrated by Victor’s refusal to make a female creature:

I was now about to form another being, of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant... she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation... She also might turn with disgust from him to the superior beauty of man (Shelly 118-119).

The ‘compact before her creation’ can be likened to the centuries-old gender roles established by the Christian Church whereby women are submissive to male authority. The fact that a ‘thinking and reasoning animal’ might undermine those roles indicates that Frankenstein is wary of the capacity of women to examine the world critically and develop their sense of self. What is notable, however, is that, in his attempt to protect the ‘superior beauty of man’, he created a

physical monstrosity, “gigantic in proportions” with a face of “appalling hideousness” (Shelly 158). The Creature’s deformities are the result of his unnatural masculine creation. Therefore, it is apparent that the text views femininity as crucial to the development of the self, lest that self become abhorrent.

Within the two texts, the fates of the characters are reflected in their respective understandings of literature and gender. In *Frankenstein*, Nature, who is gendered female within the novel (Shelly 33), ultimately retaliates against Frankenstein due his attempts to subvert her. Whether it be the storm on the night of the Creature’s creation, the waves which led Victor to what he believed would be “his grave” (Shelly 144), or the cruel cold of the Arctic that eventually kills him, Nature haunts Victor throughout the novel. This demonstrates the severe consequences of attempting to detach the feminine from the development of the self. Furthermore, it establishes the female Nature as an active being, capable of influencing the novel’s narrative and thus being crucial to development of individuals within the novel. Following Frankenstein’s death, the Creature is “borne away by the waves, and lost in the darkness and distance” (Shelly 161). The way that the Creature disappears into the sea implies a merging of Creature and Nature in Frankenstein’s absence, indicating that femininity’s role in development has been restored.

It has already been established that Catherine’s critical reading and willingness to challenge male authority enable her to manipulate her narrative. However, it is also notable that Henry Tilney, who appears to be the most critical reader in *Northanger Abbey*, is initially blind to the parental tyranny of his father. He confronts Catherine regarding her feelings towards his father, asking if such atrocities could occur “in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing” (Austen 136). Henry correctly identifies that an understanding

of literature is indicative of development; however, his analysis neglects the restrictions that women are subject to within British society, particularly within the home. Wyett argues that Henry's inability to incorporate the experience of women into his perspective comparatively establishes Catherine's "politicized adult consciousness" (271). This emphasises the connection between understanding society's treatment of femininity and development, supporting the argument that Catherine is the most developed character with the most accurate perception of society within *Northanger Abbey*. Hence, the only character within both novels with both an acute understanding of literature and a respect for feminine autonomy is Catherine, who is also the character who takes full control of her narrative and achieves a happy ending.

After close analysis, it is clear that both *Frankenstein* and *Northanger Abbey* highlight the roles literature and gender play in the development of the self. While Catherine and the Creature both develop their perspectives from a critical engagement with literature, the Creature's reading ultimately results in despair for himself and those around him. The key difference between the two comes from the absence of femininity in the Creature's creation and narrative which prevents him from achieving the human form he views as essential for virtuosity. Thus, it is possible to conclude that Romantic texts, such as *Frankenstein* and *Northanger Abbey* view a combination of critical reading and a respect for femininity and feminine narratives as the cornerstone of self-development.

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