What's in a Monster?

What Makes Frankenstein’s Monster Monstrous?

The answer is simple: his sheer ugliness. Because of his physical deformity (he is not only ugly but huge, a hulk of a monster), he strikes terror in whoever sees him, not only in people who were unaware of his existence, like the De Lacey family, or the man whose daughter he has just saved from drowning, but in his creator, from the very beginning, on that dreary night of November (“breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” – Shelley 1992, 56: this occurs, when the monster had hardly started breathing).

But we immediately have a problem with this answer. If we read the physical description of the newly-born monster carefully, we realize that it is ambiguous, that it hesitates between extreme ugliness and beauty, as Victor Frankenstein confesses that “I had selected his features as beautiful” (56). And, truly, the description at times reads like a blazon of the female body: “his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness” (56). We may compare this with the description of Safie, later in the novel: “Her hair of a shining raven black, and curiously braided; her eyes were dark, but gentle, although animated” (113). There is a difference, however, as the monster not only shows signs of premature aging (“his shriveled complexion” – 56) and of vampiric death in life (“and straight black lips” – 56), but above all his gaze is hardly human and, in spite of these “luxuriances,” his face can only inspire horror: “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” (56). If the gaze is the expression of a soul, it would appear that Victor has not been able to endow his creature with one: but it will eventually become clear to the reader, as she reads the monster's eloquently told story, that he has a soul indeed, or at least all the emotions of a human being.

What is wrong with the monster, what makes him a monster, is not so much his physical monstrosity as the hesitation he induces: is he female (the blazon is of a female body) or male (his creator refers to him as “he”): “His limbs were in proportion” – Shelley 1992, 56)? Above all, he is both human (since he is referred as "he") and not human: indeed, the first reference to the monster is to a “creature” that is not a human being, as it is referred to as an “it”: “It breathed hard” (56).

Such ambiguity (is he fish, is he fowl?) cannot be sustained, and it takes hardly three paragraphs for Victor to ascribe his creation to a category, that is to move from "creature" (“the dull yellow eyes of the creature” – 56), to "wretch" (“the wretch whom with such infinite pains” – 56) to "being" (“the being I had created” – 56) and finally to “monster” (“the wretch – the miserable monster whom I had created” – 57). The right category has at last been found: the creature is a monster, and the process of de-humanisation through categorisation is achieved at the end of the fourth paragraph, when the monster is again referred to as an "it:" "it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived" (57). From that moment, the identity of the monster is established: he is
"the monster." And the answer to my question must be duly modified: the monster is monstrous not because of his physical characteristics (his size and ugliness), but because he is called so.

In order to understand the effect of this naming, let us consider the occurrences of the word "monster" in the novel. I counted twenty-seven. Only two of those do not concern the monster. A condemned Justine proclaims her innocence: "I almost believed I was the monster he [her confessor] said I was" (Shelley 1992, 84): the use of the term here is metaphorical, as it applies to a human being. But we note the implicit irony, as William, for the murder of whom she has just been sentenced to death, has indeed been killed by a monster, the monster. After Justine's execution, Elizabeth repeats her belief in her innocence and adds those pessimistic words: "Men appear to me as monsters thirsting for each other's blood" (89). Again, the use of the term is metaphorical, and again we note the irony, since if the monster has become a monster, it is because the moral monsters that men are have made him so.

The other twenty-five occurrences of the term concern Victor's creature. Of these, thirteen are uttered by Victor himself (who therefore takes responsibility for the naming), four by the monster himself (who therefore has interiorised the name imposed upon him), three by Walton at the very end of the novel, when he meets the creature (in this, he obviously follows his friend's lead). The remaining three are spoken by other people: William, by exclaiming "Hideous monster! let me go" (Shelley 1992, 138), precipitates his fate, all the more so as he boasts of being a Frankenstein; the magistrate whom Victor consults after his wife's murder also uses the term, no doubt in order to humour the madman by following his lead (193); and finally, the inhabitants of "a wretched hamlet by the sea-shore" confirm to Victor, already in hot pursuit, that "a gigantic monster" has arrived the night before and frightened them (199).

Equally interesting is the distribution of those utterances in the course of the narrative. The term is used first (and foremost) by Victor, then by the monster himself, then by other people. This reflects a process of naming: Victor is in the place of God, who names his creature, and the name is duly accepted by the creature and later adopted by the community of speakers.

The monster's monstrosity, therefore, does not lie in his nature: he is ugly but benevolent. He hopes that this second characteristic will compensate for the first, as it ought to do, before revealing his existence to the De Laceys. In this, as we know, he is sadly mistaken, as a result of which he becomes morally monstrous, thus conforming his inner being to his outer form. But he does so only when he is violently rejected, treated like a monster not only by name but by deeds, the injustice of which cannot but be impressed on the reader. In other words, he becomes evil only because society makes him miserable: "Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous" (Shelley 1992, 97).

How can we account for this extraordinary power of naming? Perhaps by listening to Jacques Lacan: "If I call the person whom I address by whatever name I give him, I impose on him the subjective function that he must take up in order to answer me, even if his response is to reject it" (Lacan 1966, 299; my translation). Let us explore this "subjective function" further.
What's in a Name?

My first section has reached the conclusion that the monster is monstrous because he is named a monster. The question, therefore, is: what is a name and how does it work?

In the case of the monster, the name does not name a natural thing, like 'gold,' or a species, like 'tiger' – the monster is not a member of a species; therein lies the tragedy of his life. Nor is it the shorthand for a set of definite descriptions (the monster is he from whom Victor fled on a dreary night in November, he who was with Victor on his wedding-night, etc.). All those definite descriptions actually describe the monster, but they do not make him a monster, they are not the reason why he is called so.

The name "monster," therefore, is an appellation, etymologically an appeal, a form of hailing, as when William exclaims, "Hideous monster! let me go" (Shelley 1992, 138). The relevant detail is the exclamation mark, which indicates that the name is the actualisation of the deictic function of language that Karl Bühler (1934) calls 'Appell' (appeal), the relation between speaker and hearer or co-speaker, one of the three functions of language, with expression, which denotes the relationship between the utterance and its speaker, and representation, which denotes the relationship between the utterance and the world (Bühler 1934, 35). But this process of 'Appell' through naming covers two widely different realities. It does cover a form of hailing, for which any word will do, "You!" as well as "Hideous monster!" (a famous 1954 American B-film, about mutant ants the size of elephants, has for its title a single word: 'Them!'). But it also covers another reality: a socially accepted name, a mark of identity. The problem of the monster is that he is given the name 'monster' not merely as a form of hailing but as a mark of identity, for which the term 'monster' is unsuitable, as it is not a name in the socially accepted sense. 'Monster' is a noun, the indication of a class, a concentrated form of definite description, not what the French language calls a nom propre, by which we must understand a name that is the individual's own name, but also a proper, that is a socially fitting name. Without such a proper name one cannot acquire social identity, one is condemned to being a social outcast, a wanderer or someone like the titular character of Conrad's The Secret Sharer. In France in the 1930s, such people were called apatrides: they had no nationality and therefore no social rights; today they are called sans papiers, people without proper documentation, and therefore without the rights that such marks of belonging bestow. The monster is, in anticipation, the fictional incarnation of those shadowy figures. The irony, of course, is that outside the text he has acquired a name by stealing the name of his creator, Victor: for the man in the street, 'Frankenstein' is the name of the monster. Within the narrative, however, he is hailed but remains without a proper name. What are the consequences of this state of affairs?

In order to understand this, let us practise a deliberately anachronistic thought experiment. Let us ask whether the monster could obtain a passport. Could he fill out a passport application form? And, by way of comparison, could Count Dracula? Here is the result of their failed attempts:
Passport application form | Contribution to identity | Frankenstein’s monster | Dracula
---|---|---|---
1. Photograph | Recognition | + | -
2. Name | Insertion within the tribe | - | +
3. Christian name | Insertion within a lineage | - | +
4. Date of birth | Insertion within history, a generation, an individual destiny | - | -
5. Place of birth | Insertion within a neighbourhood | + | +
6. Nationality | Insertion within a nation state | - | +
7. Address | Registration in an electoral register | - | +
8. Signature | Capacity to be a party to legal transactions | - | +
9. Official stamps | Official guarantee | - | -

The left-hand column lists the items of information the applicant must provide on a passport application form. Failure to do so will prevent you from getting papers establishing your identity. The next column spells out the contribution of those items to the construction of the social identity of the applicant: it is all a question of recognition (I recognize myself, I am recognized by others) and integration (I am who I am because I am a member, of a nation, a neighbourhood, a profession, etc.).

The last two columns are attempts by Frankenstein’s monster and Count Dracula to fill in their passport application form. Where it appears that although the count cannot provide a photograph (vampires have no mirror image and therefore cannot be photographed) or mention his real date of birth (he was born in the Middle Ages, a fact which the authorities would find hard to believe), which will deprive him of the official stamps, he can fill in all the other rubrics: he has a name, a lineage, an address, a nationality, etc. Whereas the poor monster, who can provide a photograph (of extraordinary ugliness) can only give a place of birth (provided he does not mention that his birth took place in a lab, by unnatural means): he has neither surname nor Christian name, and therefore cannot sign his name like an ordinary citizen; he cannot give his date of birth, as he is still as old as an infant, although in all other respects he is an adult – again, the authorities would find this hard to believe; he has no nationality; he has no address, being a monster of no fixed address, condemned to roam the utmost extremities of the world; and of course, he cannot obtain official stamps, as the authorities refuse to believe in his existence. In short, the monster is a truly fantastic character – if the fantastic is defined as the irruption of the impossible that threatens the very fabric of our ordinary world. Conversely, Dracula, although he has fantastic traits, is closer to a marvellous character – if the marvellous is defined as the creation of another world, a technically possible world, even if it differs widely from our real world. The relevant difference between the two literary genres is that the fantastic has no need of the supernatural (the monster is the product of cutting-edge science) and yet it seriously subverts
our real world (the monster is the harbinger of a race of superhuman creatures that may replace humankind – this is why Victor refuses to create a partner for him), whereas the marvellous, which makes free use of the supernatural, ultimately comforts our world and its values (in *Dracula*, the separation between good and evil is crystal clear).\(^1\)

From this we may conclude that the problem of the monster is that, for lack of a name, he is not a full-fledged subject. He is monstrous because he is not properly instituted as a subject: he is the object of a wrong appellation (both a wrong process of hailing and a wrong name, which makes him a fantastic character). This is the mark – this is my main thesis – of a failed because flawed process of interpellation.

**What's in a Subject?**

This is how, in his sixth thesis on Feuerbach, Marx defines what he calls "human essence:" "The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations" (Marx and Engels 1965, 652). In the Marxian tradition (embodied in the names of Louis Althusser and Lucien Sève), a subject is a nexus of social relations. The realisation of human essence is a movement from individual to subject through a process of interpellation.

The concept of interpellation is central to Althusser’s theory of ideology. It is introduced in the course of a primitive scene of hailing: a police constable blows his whistle, the person concerned immediately turns around and, Althusser says, in and by that 180-degree rotation he or she becomes a subject – a subject interpellated by and therefore subjected to ideology, in other words, placed in a determinate position in the order of things (Althusser 2014, 264).

It all begins with a scene of hailing, as when Victor, having ascended Montanvert, finds himself face to face with his creature: "Abhorred monster! Fiend that thou art! The tortures of hell are too mild a vengeance for thy crimes" (Shelley 1992, 96). The insulting name of exclusion is enough to interpellate the monster. And since such interpellation is a social process (and "monster" duly becomes the only name of the creature), it is interiorised by the interpellated subject ("the monster that I am," says the monster when he looks at his image in a pool – 110).

But this Narcissus scene occurs long before he is called "monster" by his creator, long before anybody has called him so or behaved as if he were one. Althusser’s theory pre-empts this objection by stating that the individual is always already a subject. The place of the subject is assigned before birth, through the imposition of a surname and the choice of a Christian name. The monster, therefore, calls himself so even before anyone has used the name to his face, in execration: all he has to do is look at his face in a pool – a scene of inverted narcissism, a failed instance of Lacan’s mirror-stage, whereby a subject recognizes herself in her mirror image. Of course, here, the monster recognizes himself ("the monster that I am"), but there is no exhilaration in such recognition, as there is in Lacan’s mirror scene, for a simple reason. In Lacan’s account, an adult must be present who confirms that the recognition has indeed taken place: but there is no father figure present to grant the monster his proper identity. The monster, therefore, is not a properly constitutes subject. The process of interpellation, which is

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1 On *Dracula*, see Lecercle (2010, ch. 6).
supposed to make him a subject, is flawed, because there is no *inter*-pellation, that is, no dialogue with a person invested with authority, in other words, no social recognition.

But clearly there is some form of interpellation, even if it is a deleterious one. The monster is a subject in one sense of the term, by being subjected (as in French *assujetti*) to a social process of rejection that excludes him from society as a monster – a total outcast, not even the *pharmakós*, who serves the Greek city by taking its sins upon him and freeing it from their consequences when he is ceremonially expelled. This is where the monster's interpellation is flawed: it makes him a subjected subject, not a full subject, that is, not a centre of consciousness, agency and responsibility – for that is the second and more important sense of the term 'subject' in both English and French. And achieving the status of a full subject is the aim of a successful process of interpellation. By her 180-degree rotation, the subject in Althusser's primitive scene not only recognizes that she is being hailed, but acquires the capacity to act upon it, and this includes possible rebellion (for instance by in turn *interpelling* the police constable into a *sale flic*, a dirty pig). The best example of a successful *interpellation* is the passage of the individual from etymological infant to speaking subject: she must accept the constraints of the natural language she is going to speak, but those are, in the words of Judith Butler "enabling constraints," (1995, 2) which allow her to express herself freely.

It will be objected that the monster undergoes such a process: he does learn to speak English, and even to express himself in that language with considerable eloquence. And the first episodes in the narrative of his life do describe such a process of successful subjectivation. In empiricist orthodoxy, he goes from impressions to sensations and then to ideas. Thus, "I beheld a radiant form rise from among the tree," at which point the author feels compelled to insert a footnote, "The moon" (Shelley 1992, 99-100): here, the monster has not yet acquired the power of naming. But he will acquire language by listening through the chink and sharing the lessons of Safie, a process whereby he acquires an education, by appropriating the sedimented knowledge of humankind, expounded to Safie by Felix’s reading of Volney’s *Ruins*. He is even helped in this process by the 'deus ex machina' of a portmanteau containing a number of books, most notably *Paradise Lost*, where he will at last find a source of identification in the character of Satan (124). This process is a process of humanisation, which every human individual must undergo in order to become a full subject. In order to describe this process, let us make a detour through the Marxian anthropology of Lucien Sève (2008). His point of departure is Marx’s sixth thesis on Feuerbach, from which he derives his central thesis: the "ex-centration" of human essence (what makes human beings human is not their individual nature but their social relation; their inner self is an internalisation of those external relations). Humanisation, therefore, is for each human individual a process, the stages of which are captured by five Marxian concepts: *Tätigkeit* (activity or agency, the central form of which is labour), *Vermittlung* (mediation: human activity transforms nature by the mediation of tools and signs), *Vergegenständlichung* (objectification: in French, Sève calls this "objectalisation" (436), the capacity of human activity to be objectified in products or knowledge, which are sedimented and become the cumulative collective resources of humankind), *Aneignung* (appropriation: each human individual must appropriate those resources accumulated by previous generations) and *Entfremdung* (alienation: the division of society into antagonistic classes fetishises the
means of mediation and accumulated resources and makes them alien and oppressive). The human individual, in order to become fully human, must go through those stages, which in Althusserian terms (in a generalised version of Althusser's theory of ideology, for which I take full responsibility) means that she must undergo a proper process of interpellation.

The monster does undergo such a process. He shows activity and agency by working on nature to ensure his survival (he gathers berries, cuts wood, etc.); he learns to use tools (he uses the tools of the inhabitants of the cottage in order to cut wood for them) and he learns, observing through the chink, the use of signs; by listening to Safie's lessons, he gains access to the sedimented knowledge of humankind and appropriates it (he is an intelligent monster who learns quickly: Victor may have botched his external form, but not his mind). The problem is that such humanisation, or interpellation into a subject, the monster achieves by himself, in solitude, without social recognition. The consequence of this is extreme alienation, of which the monster becomes more conscious as he acquires more knowledge: "When I looked around I saw and heard of none like me. Was I, then, a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled and whom all men disowned?" (Shelley 1992, 117). In the last sentence, the grammatical hesitation between inanimate "which" and animate "whom" inscribes the failure of the process of interpellation that should have humanised the monster. Such extreme alienation is not even the social alienation of the proletarian subject, separated from the means of production, but the psychic alienation of an impossible subject who cannot be himself ("I'm not myself, you see," as Alice says to the Caterpillar – Carroll 2011, 94). The process of interpellation of the monster has been initiated, but it is so deeply flawed that it can only founder: for lack of an ensemble of social relations. The problem of the monster is that he cannot achieve the human identity to which he should be entitled.

The Monster's Revolt

There is a problem with Althusser's theory of ideology. He claims that every individual is interpellated as or into a subject, and that such interpellation never fails, thus opening the theory to a determinist interpretation: a helpless subject, always already interpel-lated, is subjected rather than subjectified. But interpellation does produce a full subject, a centre of consciousness and agency. I therefore proposed, following Judith Butler's reading of Althusser and her concept of re-signification, to complement the theory with the following proposition: there is no interpellation that does not provoke (at least potentially) a counter-interpellation (Butler 1995; 1997; Lecercle 2006). Again, the best example is the speaking subject (sujet d’énonciation): she is constrained by the grammatical constraints of the language which she must appropriate in order to speak, but those are enabling constraints, which allow her to play with them and adapt them to her expressive needs – this is what we intend by the word "style," and the process may go as far as deliberate a-grammaticality. Counter-interpellation, therefore, is the proof that full subjectivity has been achieved: the speaking subject is no longer merely spoken by her language, she actively speaks it.

The monster's plight is that he is the object of a demeaning form of interpellation, which excludes him from the society of men and prevents him from acquiring full sub-
jectivity. So, being a talented and potentially civilised monster, full of native benevo-

lence, in other words ready for the establishment of an ensemble of social relations that
will make him a full subject, he seeks to counter-interpellate this unwelcome interpel-
lation. His first attempt, with the De Laceys, is a disaster: all he gets is blows, not the
hoped-for dialogue. Being a persistent monster, he makes a second attempt, this time
with his creator, the person most liable to answer his question, the question of his doubt-
ful subjectivity, "Who am I?" So he forces him to speak to him, to listen to his story –
a first and important step towards full subjectivity (while he tells his story, he is at last
a full subject, the narrator of his own life, which begins to make sense in being told: he
has a past and may look forward to a future).

But this, of course, is not enough; it must be objectified, or objectalised, into a net-
work of social relations, whereby he will actualise his human essence. So, naturally, he
asks his creator to make him a mate, the embryo of one of Althusser's ideological ap-
paratuses, and the first and most important layer of this network of social relations, the
family. The monster – this is only natural – wants to be a husband and father. This
bourgeois aspiration reflects the fact that the ideological apparatuses that interpellate
the individual as a subject are historical constructions: the monster's dearest wish is to
be a bourgeois monster, as full humanity must, in those historical circumstances, take
the form of bourgeois humanity.

As we know, the monster's attempt fails, precisely because Victor fears not the per-
sonal but the social consequences of the creation of a race of monsters that might su-
persede humankind because they would be superior to it in all respects, except perhaps
beauty. By listening to the monster's story, Victor recognizes him as a subject (a speak-
ing subject, therefore a subject of dialogue and of narrative), but he refuses to recognize
him as a social subject – and a subject has to be a social subject in order to be a full
subject, in order to realize its human identity. In fact, until the very end of the tale, when
Walton meets him and talks to him, the monster remains a social ghost, of whom there
are only fleeting glimpses (as when Walton first catches sight of him, or when he asks
his way from the inhabitants of that "wretched hamlet on the seashore" – Shelley 1992,
199) and in whose existence most people refuse to believe, as when the magistrate hu-
mours Victor by talking of a monster that for him cannot exist. Humble fishermen may
actually see him, and thus be convinced that he actually exists, but the authorities, that
is the embodiment of the network of social relationships that make the subject a subject,
can never acknowledge his existence. This is why Justine has to die for his crime, and
why Victor is at first accused of Clerval's murder. If you have embarked upon a life of
crime, social invisibility is a major asset.

But such social invisibility cannot satisfy the monster, who aspires to be a full sub-
ject, a normal subject, a subject constrained, for his own good, by social norms. We
understand his sense of failure when Victor tears apart the bride he was making for him.
We understand the state of misery that turns a benevolent potential citizen of the com-
monwealth into an evil creature. So, in the terms of Habermas, he substitutes strategic
action for his failed communicative action: violent deeds replace rational argument (in
his discussion with Victor, the monster may have been a little emotional, but he was
fully rational in his arguments and demands). His strategic action consists in the sys-
tematic destruction of the ideological apparatus which has refused to interpellate him,
the apparatus of the family. We note that when he kills, he is not so much killing individuals (he even saves the drowning girl) as members of Victor's family and inner circle. It is when William mentions his family name that he kills him – what he cannot forgive in the child is that, unlike him, he has a proper name, that is, a family name. We understand Victor's mistake, when he wrongly interprets the mendacious oracle concerning his wedding night: he is not, as an individual, the object of the monster's rage, as the monster wishes to take revenge on the social entity that refuses him social recognition, not Victor himself, but Victor as a member of the Frankenstein family. Families are what fail the monster: first the De Laceys, then the Frankensteins. The monster is a monster because he is never given a proper name, he is never welcomed into the bosom of a family.

The Monster as Metaphor

From the very beginning, the monster has been taken as a metaphor, usually of the mob, the revolutionary crowd of French sans culottes or their potential English, or Irish, imitators. In other words, the monster has always already been historicised: his monstrosity is taken to be the reflection of a historical conjuncture. But on the face of it, history is absent from the tale: a Gothic novel is not a historical, or even a realist, novel, and there are apparently no historical allusions in the text, at least no allusions to contemporary or recent historical events. I have shown elsewhere that history is not so much absent as absented, in other words present in its very absence (Lecercle 1988). Walton's letters to his sister are dated "17 --," so the story takes place in the 18th century. And when Victor, on his way to Scotland, where he plans to make his monster a mate, visits Oxford, he notes that he does so "more than a hundred and fifty years" (154) after King Charles I had taken refuge in the city. We know that this occurred in 1642, which gives us a range of dates for the events narrated in the tale: between 1792 and 1799, in other words, during the French Revolution. But there is not the slightest allusion to those portentous events, and the Europe in which Victor travels is not ravaged by war and revolution. This absented presence of history suggests that the monster is not so much a political metaphor, as was first thought, as an ideological metaphor, a metaphor that inscribes a broad hegemonic crisis rather than a directly political one.

In what does this crisis of hegemony consist? First, it marks the crisis of the main feudal ideological apparatus, the Church. The monster's (self-)education is entirely secular: he learns about the universe not in the Bible, but in Volney's Ruins. He does acquire an idea of God, but that idea is already Feuerbachian: he conceives of the deity as a cruel and unfeeling God, in the image of his irresponsible and "wanton," as he says himself, creator (Shelley 1992, 132). Hence the fact that when he reads Paradise Lost (126), he immediately identifies with the character of Satan, in a Miltonian reversal of values of the "Evil, be thou my good" type.

The novel takes place in a historical conjuncture where the major feudal ideological apparatus has not yet been substituted by the bourgeois one, which, Althusser claims, is the School, and the other major feudal apparatus, the Family, is in a state of transition towards its bourgeois form and undergoes its own transitional crisis, as witnessed by Mary Shelley's own family background. The monster's failed interpellation, therefore, reflects a yearning (experienced by Mary Shelley herself) for the nuclear bourgeois
family of husband, wife and children, out of the dissolution of previous forms of aristocratic or peasant extended families. The monster embodies such yearning (he wants to marry his mate and have children) and the contemporary uncertainties concerning its satisfaction. This is what the monster is, what his monstrosity consists in: a failed bourgeois Jupiter hounded by a still dominant Kronos.

Works Cited