

# Creating Desolation: Frankenstein's Destructive Independence

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In *The Word "Woman,"* Laura (Riding) Jackson writes that man's ultimate desire is to be free from woman, whom he resents for her difference from him and his simultaneous dependence on her for his continued existence. In order to escape his innate dependence on woman, man constructs a future without her and lives, as much as he can, within that imagined world. The problem with this, Jackson points out, is that the future is not reality; rather, it is inevitably thwarted by the inexorable passage of time (Jackson 483). Similarly, in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein seeks to extricate himself from the limitations of nature, fashioning nature as an obstacle to be overcome on his way to greatness. Frankenstein's success, however, marks his downfall; in pushing aside nature and creating in isolation, Frankenstein conceives a desolation — a destructive force that makes future union impossible for Frankenstein.

Frankenstein's egotism and lack of self-awareness reflect Jackson's man. Man, Jackson writes, is on a constant quest to differentiate himself from woman and establish his dominance over her while she stands by, awaiting the day he realizes that he can only be whole when joined with her (Jackson 483). It is in this very passivity, Jackson argues, that woman's power resides. Woman's groundedness and rejection of the fantastical in favor of the real allows her to be secure in her own identity while acknowledging her bond with man; their link causes no existential crises for her (Jackson 483). On the other hand, woman's presence is infuriating to man because she is a constant reminder of his dependence on her. To cope, Jackson writes, man

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takes refuge in the future: "man becomes for himself his own future; his preoccupation is with himself...Only the future can he safely call his own. But the future is an abstraction. It is, true, the completely private region of his thoughts; woman is absent from it. But it is unreal in its very privacy" (Jackson 482-483). Wholly self-absorbed, the misguided man seeks fulfillment in himself and creates impossible worlds that lack the very thing that make them possible: woman, the source of all life. Man has absolute control over the future because that future lives only in his mind; once it is subsumed by the present, man is disappointed once again by the reality that he is not the supreme master. For Frankenstein, this moment comes when his long and frenzied experiment comes to its completion.

Through the lens of *The Word "Woman,"* Frankenstein's experimentation with life is one long flight of the male imagination. Frankenstein's reaction to discovering the principle of life makes clear his painful lack of humility or restraint. He says, "I was surprised that among so many men of genius, who had directed their inquiries towards the same science, that I alone should be reserved to discover so astonishing a secret" (Shelley 79). Frankenstein sees his discovery as destined and revels in his privilege. His smugness is only confirmed by the fact that Frankenstein does not share his knowledge with anyone: it is reserved for him, proof of his exceptionality. It is the very fact that he is alone that is so attractive to Frankenstein because it allows him total ownership of the experiment. After spending his life in the comfortable embrace of his loved ones and under the guidance of professors, Frankenstein is suddenly set apart from the rest; this newfound independence is intoxicating.

Choosing a human being as his first attempt at creating life further reveals Frankenstein's lack of perspective. Describing his enthusiasm, Frankenstein says, "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No

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father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs”

(*Frankenstein* 80-81). Intoxicated by delusions of grandeur, Frankenstein fails to consider the implications of creating new life and sees it merely as a way to bolster his own ego. There seems to be a gap in Frankenstein's imagined future: while he will “deserve” his creatures' worship, Frankenstein does not see any sort of responsibility on his own side after the physical creation. Frankenstein imagines that he will supersede the role of “father” and become, instead, a God figure. Frankenstein's imagined situation is that of Genesis 2, in which God creates a fully formed, intellectually mature adult. In launching himself into this divine narrative, however, Frankenstein entirely neglects the creation that continues as parents form their children's intellects. Frankenstein never makes any mention of what will happen after his creation is finished or considers its well-being, but simply imagines it to be “happy and excellent” by virtue of its very existence. Like Jackson's man, Frankenstein's imagined future lacks the components necessary for its success in reality and reveals his disconnect from rational thought.

Frankenstein's experiment becomes his obsession. Utterly isolating himself and only dimly aware of the horrors he is committing, Frankenstein plunges forward with a single-minded focus. Frankenstein says,

One secret which I alone possessed was the hope to which I had dedicated myself; and the moon gazed on my midnight labours, while, with unrelaxed and breathless eagerness, I pursued nature to her hiding places. Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil, as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave, or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay? (Shelley 81)

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Frankenstein hinges his life on his future success and allows every other commitment, whether to human decency or to his loved ones, to fall by the wayside. Frankenstein's language suggests that he sees himself as subduing nature; he pursues her "to her hiding places" and tortures animals to extract life. Frankenstein's process of creation is perverted and violent, directly opposed to nature, yet he rationalizes his cruelty by receding ever deeper into his imagined future. Similarly, Jackson's man deludes himself into believing that woman's allowing him to continue to exist is a result of his own conquest of her. Jackson writes that man sees woman's indulging his fancies as "the yielding rather than the active consent of woman" (Jackson 482). As the line between Frankenstein's life and his experiment becomes blurred, he begins to lose himself within his own mind. His project, Frankenstein says, "had taken an irresistible hold of my imagination. I wished, as it were, to procrastinate all that related to my feelings of affection until the great object, which swallowed up every habit of my nature, should be completed" (Shelley 82). In living so completely within his expectations of the future, Frankenstein begins to lose his sense of self as well as his humanity; his obsession has overcome "every habit of [his] nature." Thus, Frankenstein's identity becomes contingent on the experiment and fully detached from reality.

The moment Frankenstein endows his creature with life marks the collapse of the future Frankenstein had created in his mind. Frankenstein says, "now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart" (Shelley 83-84). This moment of realization snaps Frankenstein out of his dream and into the present, where he is brought face to face with his own fallibility. Unlike Jackson's man, Frankenstein successfully creates his dream; however, it comes to fruition in nightmare form. Though he had intended for the creature to be beautiful, Frankenstein says, "those luxuriances only formed a more horrid

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contrast with his watery eyes...and straight black lips" (Shelley 83). The creature echoes Frankenstein's language when he describes his own appearance: "my form is a filthy type of your's, more horrid from its very resemblance" (Shelley 144). The reality of the creature, then, mocks the dream. The incongruity of the creature's features marks him as obviously unnatural; in attempting to bypass nature, Frankenstein only succeeds in corrupting it. Similarly, Jackson highlights the absurdity of the notion that man can create on his own when woman is the source of life and the principle that allows man's continued being. She writes, "Independence from woman has been the object of all the so-called 'creative' activity of man: the very notion of 'creation' implies the disappearance of the separate phenomenon 'woman' in male activity" (Jackson 485). Jackson mocks man's effort to create as empty; clearly, man has failed because woman persists as the source of renewal to which he is repeatedly drawn back.

When he first describes his experiment, Frankenstein says, "I began the creation of a human being" (Shelley 80). For the remainder of the work, however, Frankenstein never gain refers to the creature as a human, but rather a "creation," "creature," "monster," or "daemon," among other diminishing terms. Though he made the creature in a human form with human intelligence, Frankenstein deems his creation a monster from the first moment of his life. Frankenstein flees from the creature in horror, leaving him to his own devices and effectively washing his hands of him. In doing so, Frankenstein denies his creature entry into the human life he once envisioned for him. As the only being of his kind, the creature has no natural companions and no hope of creating life through procreation. Thus, two of the primary drives of human beings are thwarted for the creature. Further, Frankenstein leaves the creature unfinished in that he teaches him nothing about language and he does not prepare him to enter the human world. Abandoned and incomplete, Frankenstein's creation becomes, instead, a desolation.

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Unlike Frankenstein, the creature understands that creation is impossible in isolation. The creature repeatedly describes himself as “desolate” and resents Frankenstein for having created him thus. The term “desolate” evokes not just loneliness or misery, but also a barren landscape or an abandoned home; cold, comfortless, and empty, the image is one of profound loss. Describing his murder of Frankenstein's younger brother, William, the creature says, “I gazed on my victim, and 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 154-155). The creature's gazing on his victim implies a sense of wonder at his actions and he revels in his own power. The creature feels, for the first time, a sense of accomplishment, but it is achieved through destruction. The creature's use of the word “hellish” makes clear that he is aware of the perversity of his achievement. In his current state of isolation, the creature can only create negatively: through destruction, he creates misery for Frankenstein and repays him for his own desolation.

The creature attempts to remedy his desolation by demanding that Frankenstein make him a companion and allow the pair to depart from the world of humans. The creature threatens Frankenstein, saying, “I will work at your destruction, nor finish until I desolate your heart, so that you shall curse the hour of your birth” (Shelley 156). The creature presents two options to Frankenstein: to either finish the project he began and bring it, to the extent of his ability, to a more natural conclusion, or to experience the desolation that the creature experiences. After initially agreeing to the request, Frankenstein suddenly feels a duty to mankind not to allow the union: “I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace as the price perhaps of the existence of the whole human race”

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(Shelley 174). In a frenzy, Frankenstein tears the nearly completed female creature to pieces. Frankenstein identifies his duty to humanity as greater than his duty to his creation and, in doing so, expresses a wish to return to his natural place in the world as a human being. This reunion with the human world, however, is never attained. Instead, the creature makes good on his initial threat. After first killing Frankenstein's best friend, he kills Frankenstein's new bride on their wedding night. Shortly thereafter, Frankenstein's father dies from grief and Frankenstein, now alone in the world, devotes the rest of his life to hunting down and destroying the creature.

Jackson's writing contains a crucial ambiguity. Describing the beginning of the unification process of man and woman, Jackson writes, "when man has been completely differentiated, there remains for him destruction, or salvation – the rejoining of himself to that from which he has been differentiated, from which he has differentiated himself" (Jackson 483). It is unclear whether Jackson means that man has two options, destruction or salvation, or that destruction and salvation are merely two sides of the same coin. Frankenstein's plight, however, seems to signify the former. In attempting to create an identity distinct from nature, Frankenstein went too far: he entirely severed himself from the natural order. While Jackson's man created the unnatural only in his mind, Frankenstein created it in reality. His only option, then, is destruction.

When Robert Walton finds the creature weeping over Frankenstein's dead body, he exclaims, "Wretch! It is well that you come here to whine over the desolation that you have made" (Shelley 218-219). The creature answers with a lament of his helplessness and self-loathing. The creature describes his descent, through his murders, into true desolation: "I had cast of all feeling, subdued all anguish to riot in the excess of my despair. Evil thenceforth became my good. Urged thus far, I had no choice but to adapt my nature to an element which I

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had willingly chosen" (Shelley 218). Thus, desolation produced desolation, entrapping both Frankenstein and the creature in an endless cycle unto their deaths and preventing them from participating in the natural world.

Laura (Riding) Jackson's *The Word "Woman"* provides a different perspective on the classic interpretation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a cautionary tale of science gone too far. Viewing Frankenstein as Jackson's "man" and nature as her "woman" frames the novel as a story of self-perpetuating betrayal born from prideful delusions. Just as woman remains the constant and the secure in *The Word "Woman,"* only nature comes out on the other side of *Frankenstein* unscathed, silently standing by as men bring destruction on themselves rather than admit their reliance on her.



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### Works Cited

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