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The Correct Misinterpretation:

The Uncanny in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

Somewhere--Hollywood comes to mind, though perhaps a bit unfairly--Victor Frankenstein's monster inherited his creator's name. A purist might find this annoying, but this confusion reflects an important aspect of the relationship between Frankenstein and his creation. One might say that the person who calls the monster "Frankenstein" correctly misinterprets the text: for, in fact, the text encourages--even demands--this conflation of man and monster, creator and creature, victor and vanquished, Victor and victim. The uncanniness of Shelley's text depends on this doubling, and the extra-textual confusion of monster and maker only enhances this effect.

When I speak of Frankenstein's "uncanniness," I refer, of course, to Freud's famous essay on the unheimlich--literally "unhomely," but translated into English as "uncanny" (Freud 21). In both English and German, the word denotes the "dread and creeping horror" (19) experienced when we face something new and inexplicable, especially something that appears supernatural. Freud notes, however, that this definition is "incomplete" (21);

many new, inexplicable things, even apparently supernatural ones, are not the least bit uncanny. Obviously, the inexplicable requires that something be added if it is to evoke an uncanny reaction. Freud's essay seeks to identify this additional something.

At first glance, unheimlich ("novel and unfamiliar" [21]) would appear to be simply the opposite of heimlich ("familiar, 'native,' 'belonging to the home'" [21]). However, Freud explains, heimlich is too ambiguous a term to allow such a simplistic opposition: it applies, in fact, to two distinct ideas,

which without being contradictory are yet very different: on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight. (28)

Further, in its development toward these two distinct ideas, heimlich follows an increasingly ambivalent track until, at one point, "among its different shades of meaning, the word heimlich exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, unheimlich." In other words, at some point, "heimlich . . . comes to be unheimlich" (27-28). Thus, Freud argues, unheimlich is not merely an opposite but rather "in some way or other a sub-species of heimlich" (30).

Freud's word study yields one particular connotation which especially captures his attention: "'Unheimlich' is the name for everything that ought to have remained. . . hidden and secret and has become visible" (27). This definition, Freud writes, "throws quite a new light on the concept of the 'uncanny,' one which we had certainly not awaited" (28). And, though perhaps "unawaited," this "new light" is certainly not unwelcome, for it flings wide the door for Freud's concept of repression. Indeed, it proves foundational to Freud's own definition of the uncanny: the unheimlich is "in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression" (47).

Freud's essay engages an earlier argument by E. Jentsch; since Jentsch illustrates his definition of the "uncanny" by performing a reading of E. T. A. Hoffmann's The Sandman, Freud does the same. But had he cast around for an appropriate example of the uncanny in literature, he could just as easily have settled on Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Rife with "unrestricted narcissism" (46), the "castration-complex" (36), the "repetition-compulsion" (44), and so on, Frankenstein is a psychoanalyst's dream. I do not intend to perform a psychoanalytic reading of Shelley's text, but I would like to further explore one of the ideas found in Freud's discussion of

heimlich and unheimlich: specifically, the role family plays in the creation of "uncanniness" in Frankenstein.

The first, most common definition of heimlich refers to "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar. . ." (23). Its etymological ancestor contains an interesting nuance: "belonging to the house or the family, or regarded as so belonging" (23, my emphasis). From this perspective, the heimlich is not only familiar but familial. The unheimlich, then, would be that which does not belong to the house or the family; or (keeping in mind heimlich's second distinction) that which is kept concealed and secret from the family. Frankenstein addresses both these issues: the monster is shut out of his family because his "father"--who has concealed his "birth"--rejects him.

The monster, unfortunately, is "born" at the fringe of a strangely involuted family. While Victor's mother seems open to outsiders--she adopts Elizabeth, for example, and takes Justine into her service--she nonetheless turns the family in upon itself, almost incestuously: on her deathbed, she reveals that her "firmest hopes of future happiness were placed on the prospect" of Victor and Elizabeth's "union" (42).

Of course, Victor and Elizabeth are not actually siblings; technically, they violate no taboo. Their relationship, however, is troublingly ambiguous, both for themselves and for the reader. On the one hand, they stress the relational

distance between them: they call each other "familiarily by the name of cousin" (35), and Elizabeth refers to her adopted parents as "uncle" and "aunt" (62-63). At the same time, Victor's parents tend to collapse this distance: when his mother expresses her "firmest hopes" for the two of them, she addresses them both as "My children" (42); Victor's father refers to Elizabeth as his "more than daughter" (188).

Nor is this just the suggestive murmuring of the taboo-seeking psychoanalyst. When Victor seems hesitant to marry Elizabeth, both she and her uncle/father suspect that Victor might not want "a more intimate union" because they have been raised so closely, "as brother and sister" (144, 178). And, though Victor dismisses this fear, he nonetheless calls Elizabeth his "more than sister" (35)--his sister, his cousin, his love, his bride. Growing up together creates ties of family that play against the ties of mere friendship.

Victor's mother leaves him a problematic view of parenting, as well, for she displays a strange attitude toward children. Though her primary motivation for adoption may have been pity, her decisions seem based as much on a prejudiced love of the child's beauty as on the child's need: the lovely Elizabeth is golden-haired, blue-eyed, a "being heaven-sent" among "dark-eyed, hardy little vagrants" (34). Further--though, again, her primary motivation may have been pity--the mother exacts

gratitude: Elizabeth tellingly describes her adopted cousin/sister Justine (whom the mother "received in [the] family" as a mere servant) as "the most grateful little creature in the world" (63). But even worse, Victor's mother exerts the power of ownership: she brings the orphaned Elizabeth home as a "pretty present" for the young Victor (34-35), and expects that the two of them will indeed fulfill her wishes and marry.

Thus we find that Victor creates his own child in this same image: the image of beauty ("His limbs," Victor says, "were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful" [56]), gratitude ("No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I" [52]), and power ("so astonishing a power" as to "bestow animation upon lifeless matter" [52, 53]). Yet even Victor's mother brings the children into the family; Victor creates his child outside of the family, concealed and hidden, heimlich and unheimlich, familial but unfamiliar.

And when the "dull yellow eye" of his "son" opens, Victor Frankenstein, the "father" who seeks his creature's gratitude, rejects him cold. Victor runs from the room, terrified, realizing that the "beauty" he had envisioned has become "a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived." He rejects his son's first attempts at speech, running from the house as the monster's "jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds" (57). Years later, when he finally encounters his son

again, he cries, "Begone, vile insect! Or rather, stay, that I may trample you to dust" (95). And, of course, his refusal to supply his son with a wife demonstrates the ultimate rejection: he refuses to allow his creation to find a family of his own.

Driven into hiding by the panicked and violent reactions of anyone who sees him, the monster finds shelter in a hovel behind a cottage. Here the monster learns about family, watching as the old man/father, the sister/Agatha, and the brother/son/Felix relate. This closeness and love deeply affects the monster; he decides he wants to be a part of such a family, to belong. But the monster is unheimlich: he ought to remain hidden and secret. Instead, he becomes visible and finds himself again rejected. It is here--in the family's fear and in the anguish of the monster's rejection--that we find perhaps the single most "uncanny" image in the text:

I lighted the dry branch of a tree and danced with fury around the devoted cottage, my eyes still fixed on the western horizon, the edge of which the moon nearly touched. A part of its orb was at length hid, and I waved my brand; it sank, and with a loud scream I fired the straw and heath. . . . The wind fanned the fire, and the cottage was quickly enveloped by the flames, which clung to it and licked it with their forked and destroying tongues. (132-33)

The monster, deformed and discolored, waiting for the watchful the moon to set; the fury and insanity of his dance; the clinging flames: the destruction of the cottage: all represent his rejection of family, which has rejected him. And from this point on, the monster becomes truly uncanny: inexplicable, almost supernatural, concealed but revealing himself in sudden and horrific acts of violence.

Yet, however far outside the family, the monster is still his father's son. Though Victor rejects his creation, pushing him away, threatening him, forcing him into the role of Other ("Nothing in human shape could have destroyed that fair child," Victor says, demonizing the monster [73]), he cannot free himself from his responsibilities as a "parent." Indeed, we find a troubling, unheimlich, familial relationship between Victor and his monster--a relationship that collapses in upon itself and results in an uncanny "doubling" effect.

This doubling begins with the issue of responsibility. Though at one point Victor declares himself "guiltless," the victim of a "curse" (155), most of the time he admits at least responsibility for the creation of his monster: William and Justine are the "first hapless victims" of his "unhallowed arts" (85); he acknowledges that his "murderous machinations" have resulted in his friend Clerval's death (169); the monster's crimes have their "source" in him (176). But at times the line

between himself and his monster disappears completely: faced with Justine's unjust prosecution for the murder of little William, Victor calls himself the "true murderer" (84); in his fever, he calls himself "the murderer of William, of Justine, and of Clerval" (169).

As the book continues, and as more of Victor's loved ones are killed, Victor and his monster become more closely linked; the line separating them becomes more tenuous. Each becomes the other's master; each becomes the other's slave. On the one hand, when Victor agrees to create a mate for his monster, he becomes (in his own words) "the slave of [his] creature" (146); on the other hand, the monster becomes "the slave, not the master" (208) when he succumbs to the desire for revenge-- "revenge, henceforth dearer than light or food" (160).

And, in fact, it is revenge that links Victor to his monster; for in revenge--"the devouring and only passion of my soul" (190)--Victor becomes the monster. In revenge, the monster leads Victor northward; in revenge, Victor pursues madly. It is as if the monster needs his creator to follow him; at the same time, it is as if Victor needs to follow his creation. Indeed, their roles have become completely dependent upon one another. We sense that, if Victor were to turn around, the monster would then become the pursuer and Victor the

pursued. Each other's enemy, they have become each other's mate; and the pursuit will continue until death does them part.

In revenge, the man, Victor, becomes monster; in misery, the monster becomes man: and, finally, both bear the name Frankenstein.

Works Cited

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