

Assignment:

As a student of Dr. Freud, interpret the relationship between Frankenstein and his monster as a metaphor for the development and operation of the super-ego. Be sure to show a detailed understanding of the formation and work of the super-ego (as Freud discusses it in chapters 7 and 8 of *Civilization and Its Discontents*) and supply concrete detailed evidence from *Frankenstein*. It may help you in thinking about this to treat the story of Frankenstein and his monster as a haunting dream Frankenstein has.

Essay:

Freud and Frankenstein: Tracing the Development of the “Super-Ego”

Emily Kay Carson

The relationship between Frankenstein and his monster can be used as a metaphorical map to understanding Sigmund Freud’s conception of the “super-ego,” or in other words, the human sense of guilt and conscience. Frankenstein’s sense of guilt develops around the violent, aggressive way he creates his monster. The monster causes the ripples of guilt to grow by causing him to fear losing his loved ones, losing his sources of protection, and punishment for his sins. After it is fully developed, Frankenstein’s guilt and the monster’s overshadowing presence serve as guides for understanding how the super ego works to punish a soul through a constantly aggressive, nagging feeling of anxiety.

The central idea surrounding Freud’s notion of the super-ego is that guilt begins to become developed as a result of a violent, outward aggression that eventually turns inwards to punish a person from the inside. Frankenstein’s problem with the monster, or in other words, the basis of his sense of guilt, begins with the aggressive, horrifying way in which he creates him. He works day and night, battling “incredible labor and fatigue” (31), to try and realize the “desire of the wisest men since the creation of the world” (31). He spends his nights digging through the graveyard for the parts for his creation, working in a dark office that is covered in rank odor and filth. Frankenstein’s surroundings reflect an abnormal, unhealthy desire that becomes an obsession to create this monster. Everything must be bigger, larger, and faster for Frankenstein. He at first thinks about trying to give life to a smaller, simpler organism, but his imagination is “too much exalted by my first success to permit me to doubt of my ability to give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man” (32). His intensely aggressive drive results in a disproportionate being, displaced from society, created from the “resistless and almost frantic impulse” (33) that controls Frankenstein. Frankenstein’s memory of how horrid this situation had made him act serves as the cornerstone of his sense of guilt from the moment the monster begins to live, and he begins to slide into slide into despair as the aggression that had been directed toward the creation of the monster turns inward to punish him.

After his creation, the monster serves as a metaphorical guide to the development of the super-ego by first revealing all of Frankenstein’s fears that lead up to the creation

of his overwhelming sense of guilt. The first of these is a fear of the loss of love. According to Freud, humans are not born with a sense of guilt. Children learn a sense of right and wrong through negative reactions from their parents that threaten to leave them without the love that they crave. Like a child who is doing something wrong without recognition that it is inappropriate, Frankenstein is so consumed by his work during the creation of his monster that he does not even pause to think that what he is doing might ultimately be destructive. He is “urged on by an eagerness which perpetually increased” (33), and ignores all outside influences until it is too late. Frankenstein experiences this innate fear of the loss of love almost immediately after he creates the monster. He realizes with horror how detached he has become from the ones he loves, and how shocked and appalled they would be if they only knew what he had created. Frankenstein knows that if the people he loves knew about this horrific act, his father would be disappointed, Clerval might find him unworthy of friendship, and that he might lose the love of his life, Elizabeth. Thus the monster becomes a visible reminder that he has done something terribly wrong because Frankenstein can feel it threatening his personal relationships.

This fear of the monster and the fear that he will lose his loved ones simultaneously intensify after the first moments of creation. The very first night the monster lives, Frankenstein has a nightmare where he envisions himself kissing Elizabeth’s corpse, revealing his deep-seated fear of losing his loved ones. The day after the monster is born, Frankenstein is at first delighted to see that Clerval has come to visit but then “trembled” (36) with fear to think that the monster might still be there in the house. The physical presence of the monster in the home symbolizes Frankenstein’s impending fear that those he loves would shun him if they knew the truth, and also begins to show him the error of his ways.

Freud explains that aside from being afraid of losing love, humans also develop a sense of guilt from the threat of losing their source of protection. Children realize that they need parents to shelter them from hunger and pain, and therefore when they commit an error, they feel remorse partially because they do not want their protectors to leave them alone. This new fear envelops Frankenstein after the murder of William and the death of Justine. Not only is Frankenstein now dealing with being directly responsible for the loss of two loved ones, he is still dealing with the fact that if his father, Clerval, or Elizabeth knew that he were responsible for the deaths of these two innocents, his only sources of protection might leave him. The monster has made him completely vulnerable to his whims because Frankenstein can find no one to protect him from what he has done. He “lived in daily fear lest the monster whom I had created should perpetuate some new wickedness” (62), because that would make him even more guilty than he already is, as well as take away the slight protection he feels when he is around loving company. All he craves is someone to protect him and to take the “heart sickening despair” (57) that he feels away, but he knows he must face this burden alone and keep it to himself, which intensifies his guilt and shows a classic development of the super-ego.

Another large part of the development of guilt is the driving reminder of the third elemental fear that contributes to the development of the super-ego: the fear of being punished for one’s sins. Since he is the monster’s creator, he is directly responsible for the deaths of William and Justine, and then eventually the deaths of Clerval and Elizabeth. Frankenstein fears the day that anyone would find out about the monster

because he knows that he would be punished and punished severely. The monster has clearly come to represent the burden of conscience that Frankenstein feels. If people were to find out about the monster, they would find out about his misdeeds, and that thought preys on his soul. When he is in jail with the innocent Justine, he keeps quiet about his guilt, hiding in the corner of the cell “where I could conceal the horrid anguish that possessed me” (59). He knows he is the “true murderer” (59) and yet says nothing, showing his distinct fear of being caught, punished, and shunned by society. Since Frankenstein cannot communicate with anyone for fear of discovery of what he has done, he is continually forced to internalize all of the terrible things that he is culpable for. This guilt that eats him away inside even tempts him to “plunge into the silent lake, that the waters might close over me and my calamities forever” (62). The vision of his monster is stuck in the back of his mind, and all he can do is watch and wait for the monster to reappear. In other words, he is forced to wait for his newly developed super-ego to catch up with him and punish him for what he has done.

After the super-ego, or the sense of guilt, is firmly in place as a result of these threats from the outside world, it works tirelessly to punish a person for his or her wrongdoings. Identically, after the monster develops within Frankenstein a strong sense of fear and guilt, his presence quickly begins to haunt Frankenstein and make him feel eternally doomed. Frankenstein is constantly disturbed by the thought of his creation, fearing the day that it will catch up with him. Freud attributes this first to the fact that guilt is fundamentally “nothing else but a topographical variety of anxiety” (99) that makes a person constantly nervous and always living in fear. Frankenstein feels “the dead calmness of inaction and certainty which follows and deprives the soul . . . of hope” (61), and he can only wait for the monster’s next move. The knowledge that “there was always scope for fear, so long as anything I loved remained behind” (62) makes his guilt and fear grow endlessly. Frankenstein’s external unhappiness (the monster) becomes converted to a throbbing guilt and anxiety, keeping him always on edge, and “more miserable than man ever was before” (130). Just as the super-ego can never be shut off because it is so deeply ingrained within the human psyche, Frankenstein cannot leave his monster behind.

Not only does the monster serve as a constant reminder of Frankenstein’s sin, but he also becomes representative of the natural “aggressive energy” (102) of the super ego. The monster, who vows revenge on his creator, works just like the super-ego to castigate Frankenstein for his sins. The monster “is on the watch for opportunities of getting it [his sinful ego] punished by the external world” (Freud, 86). The “aggressive energy” (Freud, 102) of the monster, which manifests itself in the killing of Frankenstein’s loved ones, culminating with his most beloved Elizabeth, works to wear down Frankenstein both mentally and eventually physically. Frankenstein works to track down the monster after Elizabeth’s death, following him to “places that human beings were seldom seen” (151), yet the monster still is in control. The monster would not let his creator lose his trail, leaving signs for him such as “My reign is not over yet” (152). The monster, like Frankenstein’s guilt, would not be forgotten.

As a result of the anxiety that the monster’s life creates within Frankenstein and the eventual aggressiveness of the monster’s nature, Frankenstein withdraws into himself, becomes depressed, fearful, and self-loathing. As Freud describes it, Frankenstein “searches his soul, acknowledges his sinful nature, heightens the demands of his

conscience, imposes abstinences on himself and punishes himself with penances” (87). Frankenstein, because of his monster which causes him such guilt, now lives in a “gloomy and black melancholy that nothing could dissipate” and is simply forced to wait to discover his fate. The monster that Frankenstein had created leaves him in shambles because of his violence, just as the aggressive super-ego could easily conquer any other sinful person.

The clearest comparison between the relationship between Frankenstein and his monster and Freud’s super-ego is that neither is a natural occurrence. Freud goes to great pains to explain that humans are not born with a sense of guilt, but that it must be learned instead. Frankenstein’s creation was not a natural one either. He pushed the limits of science and morality and in short, tried too hard to advance in society. As Freud points out, “the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through a heightening of the sense of guilt” (97).