

“What Was I?”: The Monster as a Grotesque Secret in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

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Abstract

In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), the story begins with Victor Frankenstein’s ambition to access the secret of life. The creation of the Monster is thus the materialization of Frankenstein’s intention to explore the secret knowledge of life. The nameless Monster, as a being crossing the boundaries of species Frankenstein and his fellow men comprehend, turns out to be Frankenstein’s major secret in his life, which leads to his own and his creation’s torments and miseries. Concerning the outcome of Frankenstein’s secret experiment, critics have various responses. On the one hand, some critics like Joyce Carol Oates sympathize with Frankenstein, for they believe that Frankenstein’s motivation for creating the Monster are beneficial to all human beings and that his later sufferings caused by his creation should earn him more sympathy. On the other hand, some critics like Mary Poovey take sides with the Monster since it is Frankenstein’s selfish desire to play the role of God that results in his own and the Monster’s sufferings and torments. However, the relation between Frankenstein’s hiding the fact of his creation’s existence, the Monster’s physical deformity and sympathy has not received sufficient attention yet. The Monster’s grotesque physicality, which arouses horror and which is associated with evil, is the site of contestation between Frankenstein’s intention to hide the Monster’s existence and the Monster’s desire to reveal its own identity to the human community. In this paper, by adopting Noel Carroll’s theory pertaining to the grotesque, I will first analyze how Mary Shelley demonstrates the conflicts between Frankenstein and the Monster in terms of hiding/revealing its grotesque physicality, the contested site of the secret. And, I will then examine how Mary Shelley sees her Monster as a grotesque figure that deserves sympathy.

Keywords: the secret of life, the grotesque, sympathy, Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*