Williamson

AP English IV- 6th period

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Nature versus Nurture in Frankenstein

Mary Shelly relates Captain Walton and the monster’s lives by comparing their similar quests for knowledge and their resembling needs for a companion. Shelly introduces the controversial debate of nature versus nurture by contrasting the outcomes of Captain Walton and Frankenstein’s monster.

Both Robert Walton and the monster search for a comrade. Walton’s only lasting relationship is with Mrs. Margaret Saville, his sister. Besides the men aboard his ship, he only makes contact with his sister through a series of letters. Walton repeatedly whines to Margaret about his loneliness and about his “desire [of] the company of a man who could sympathize with [him]” (Shelly 7). Apparently, the men he spends every waking minute with do not provide enough for Walton in the friendship department because he claims, “I have no friend... but I bitterly feel the want of a friend” (7). His eagerness to explore the North Pole alienates him from the rest of society, so his ambition for success impedes his pursuit of a friend. Likewise, the monster finds himself alone and wanting for a counterpart. Instead of just a best friend, the creature wants a mate, someone “with whom [he] can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for [his] being” (174). Like Walton, the monster finds himself alienated from human society, but unlike Walton, the source of his estrangement originates with his physical features. Because of his hideous and terrifying features, those around him will not give him a chance to prove his worth, adding to the monster’s insecurities. The monster resolves that if Frankenstein can build a female monster equally as ugly and horrific, the two can survive on each other’s company. Regardless of their differences, both Walton and the monster long for a companion revealing the complex need for everyone to feel accepted.

Walton and the monster search to expand their minds through exploration and education respectively. Both search for something to measure their success. Because he lacked an education growing up, Walton believes he can make up for his illiteracy by “going to unexplored regions,” (8) “tracing a secure way over the pathless seas” (13). Walton measures his success by his ability to reach and explore the North Pole. Because of his ambitions, Walton and his crew spend many months stranded out at sea, therefore Walton’s journey to expand his mind through exploration failed. Because Frankenstein abandoned the monster from the first moments after its creation, the monster had no preconceived notions about the benefits of an education. The monster’s desire to learn was completely his own, and after “improving in speech, [he] also learned the science of letters” (139). Furthermore, the monster continues his education because he desires to not because of force. Neither Walton nor the monster had the opportunity to broaden their educations through formal schooling. However, Walton’s quest for an education evolved into his quest to explore the unknown, while when faced with the same adversity, the monster pursued learning. For the monster, an education presented a link into the human world. Shelly argues everyone craves an education originally but circumstance changes the desire of schooling.

When faced with the same challenges, Walton and the monster react differently because of former experiences. Because Walton had lived many years in human civilization, his response to failure is less severe than the monster’s reactions. At the end of his journey, Walton still has no friends and does not have a wider breadth of knowledge. When the crew pleads Walton to return to England, Walton “consents to return…ignorant and disappointed” (267). Walton and Frankenstein’s relationship provides confusion for Captain Walton. Frankenstein considers Walton a friend and addresses him accordingly, and although Walton eventually agrees to call Frankenstein a friend, their acquaintanceship does not last long due to Frankenstein’s death. Ultimately, Captain Walton has “lost [his] hopes of utility and glory; [he] lost [his] friend” and returns to England empty-handed (267). Frankenstein denies the monster a companion enraging the monster sending him on a quest for revenge. The monster responds with intensity and not in accordance with the civilized way of handling problems. Instead of confrontation and talking out his problems, the monster swears vengeance and kills everyone in Frankenstein’s circle of friends. As if the murders did not satisfy the monster, he claims, “soon…I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt” (277). Because he had never dealt with the human spectrum of emotions, nor had he learned the proper way of managing said emotions, the monster’s reactions appear extreme. While Walton accepts his failure and continues with his life, the monster claims he cannot survive in the human world any longer.

Captain Walton and the monster respond to life’s obstacles according to the principles of nature versus nurture. The monster, a product of nature’s upbringing, has no middle ground of emotions; he is either entirely content or extremely enraged. Walton, the product of nurture, has conformed to human society and therefore has control over his emotions during times of disappointment.