Affects of Compassion and Disgust in Frankenstein

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Abstract

By utilizing affect theory, this paper explores the issue of complexities in parent-child relationship in Mary Shelly's Frankenstein. To deal with this issue, it shows how compassion and disgust play role in determining the relationship between parents and children and in developing the nature of children. To show this, my paper analyzes the main characters, Victor Frankenstein (creator) and his creation (son). It also analyzes Frankenstein's feeling of disgust at his creation and his creation's desire for compassion from his creator (father). The feeling of disgust (lack of proper care) and lack of compassion are discussed to be the causes for arising complexity in parent-child relationship and children developing evil nature as shown in Shelly's Frankenstein. This paper seeks to study certain affects that Mary Shelly is trying to explore, about the issue of complexities between parent-child relationships in Frankenstein. This paper applies the theory of affect to study the contrasting representation of the creator and the created in Frankenstein. But the question arises, what opposing affects Mary Shelly evokes against the two characters, Victor, and the creature. The conflicting affects, the paper argues, are those of compassion for creator and disgust for the created.

Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein shows the complexities in parent-child relation in general and father-son relation in particular. Victor Frankenstein creates a monster from a dead body by using electric shocks; leaves him because he finds his creation very much ugly like the monster. He does not become ready to accept him as his creation (son). The creation (son) hopes for the fatherly love but he is left alone by his creator (father). He wants Frankenstein to perform his fatherly duty towards him:

Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind. If you will comply with my conditions, I will leave them and you at peace; but if you refuse, I will glut the maw of death, until it be satiated with the blood of your friend (77).

This shows the monster wants fatherly love and care from his creator. He feels the lack of it from his very birth and it has become his grave necessity. Because of lack of this, he finds himself alienated. This also made him so rebellious that he said Frankenstein, his creator, that he will kill his nearer friends if he does not perform his fatherly duty. It also proves that children develop sense of disgust and turn to evil if they do not get parental love and care like that of the monster in Frankenstein. The monster is one of the examples of this case. He himself says that he is made a fiend because of his father:

Remember, that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy of no miss deed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was
benevolent and good; misery made me a friend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous (77-78).

Here he says that he was normal being in the beginning like that of Adam, the first creation of god, but the negative behavior of his father made him such. The only cause of such negative development in him is his father’s ill treatment and showing no love to him. And he says that if he gets compassion from his father, he will surely turn into normal being again. He did not have love relation with his father. He did not get the fatherly affection and care. It is because of this he turned so rebellious that he even desired him to kill.

Frankenstein’s creation becoming so much rebellious and anti against his father and his dearer ones is the result of complexity in parent-child relationship which is caused mainly because of parents’ lack of proper care to their children. If the children get proper love, care and affection from their parents, they will most probably become a normal child. Similar is the case in Frankenstein as well. Frankenstein’s creation also would not have turned fiend if his creator had accepted him as his son and given him abundance of parental compassion.

Laura P. Claridge, an American author, says in “Parent-Child Tensions in Frankenste: The Search for Communion” that Frankenstein demonstrates the failure of human beings to parent their offspring in such a way that they will be able to take part in society rather than retreat into themselves. She shows Victor Frankenstein’s actions are the natural response to his own neglect as a child. She says:

Victor Frankenstein’s role as father is intensified by that fulfillment of every parent’s dream: he can deliberately, knowingly create his child; he can (20) actually choose the parts. It is especially ironic, then, that he hates what he sees. Victor produces such a grotesque model for his procreation in part as a response to his own aggressive feelings toward his parents and the guilt these emotions provoke. He is anxious throughout the gestation period... Consequently, he has geared himself to hate and fear his creature. In one sense, the ugliness affords him an escape from parental responsibilities; he can justify his immediate flight. After proving his godlike power to produce life, he is then able immediately to abandon it (2).

Claridge says that Victor Frankenstein is formed by a motif of neglect. He abandons and neglects the monster in a state of abnormal behavior. She points out that because of Victor’s deficient infant care; it is not the monster that is to blame for his evil action. It is only the “affect” of Victor’s disgust and unloving behavior, his creation turned evil. If he had got parental love and care from his creator, he would not have shown such evil behaviors. Is he had got affections, he would have been positively affected, and he would have acted normally? This shows how compassion and disgust “affects” a human being positively and negatively respectively. Frankenstein’s creation is denied of compassion, so he is negatively affected by it, and he develops his nature accordingly in a negative way.

Frankenstein abandons his creation only because he is obsessed by the feeling of shame. His creation turns to be so ugly so much so that it becomes impossible for him to accept his creation. He feels shame in accepting and socializing his creation as his own creation (son). This develops a sense of disgust in Frankenstein. Sara Ahmad in The Cultural Politics of Emotion (2003) says:

Disgust is shaped by the relation between objects. Objects come to matter within disgust reactions not simply insofar as they oppose ‘the I’, but through their contact with other objects. [...] Disgust hence operates as a contact zone; it is about how things come into contact with other things. (87)

Ahmed, in these lines, says about contact with the Other objects which in fact creates disgust. The Other is almost always seen as a lesser or inferior being and is treated accordingly. For example: monster is the other in this text. He is treated as the Other by those who have seen him. The Other thread of thought involves the myth of the monster as ‘perilous’ and ‘strange’ or ‘abnormal’ and plays with the concept that there is a monstrous ‘other’ exclusively different from the readers who, at least identify with the protagonist’s of the novels. Frankenstein dislikes and abandons his creation only because he cannot introduce his creation as his own product to his other family and social members. He does not see contact of his creation with other people possible because of his ugly outlook. It happens because whenever he sees his creation, an intense dislike for him emerges in Frankenstein, and a kind of fear also emerges because of the extreme ugly looks of his creation. James C. Hatch in “Disruptive affects: shame, disgust, and sympathy in Frankenstein” opines, “Whenever the Creature’s face is seen in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, the reaction is always the same: disgust and fear... Fear and disgust are mixed in these reactions, but what is stressed is disgust” (2). James, here, believes that the creation’s ugly outlook results in the cause of extreme dislike in Frankenstein.

It also arouses fear in him. Because of the affect of shame: disgust and fear, he forsakes his creation and he starts hating him. This creates negative impacts in the lives of overall characters including Frankenstein himself, who not only loses his nearer and dearer ones, but also loses his own life at the end. Similarly, Denise Gigante in “Facing the Ugly: The Case of Frankenstein” says, “Whatever else can—and has—been said about Victor Frankenstein’s monster, one thing cannot be denied: the creature is exceedingly ugly” (565). This claim also proves the extremity of ugliness of Frankenstein’s creation which
makes Frankenstein shameful in accepting and socializing his creation, the ultimate affect of which is terror and killing by the creation. And he does it only because he feels neglect from his creator. His monstrous acts are the result of lack of love from his father which is denied only because of his ugliness. He, in the last part of the novel, says:

...the fallen angle becomes a malignant devil. Yet even that enemy of God and man had friends and associates in his desolation; I am alone... I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on. Even now my blood boils at the recollection of this injustice. (206)

Here, he is saying that he is a victim victimized by his own creator. He abandons him which made him very much lonely in this world. His creator not only denied him his love, but also denied him his female partner, which he promised to create. Because of loneliness and lack of affection, he feels himself a miserable creature that is abandoned and aborted by his creator. He feels that his creator has done injustice to him and he has taken just revenge with him. The monstrous behavior of Frankenstein's creature is the affect of feeling of disgust in Frankenstein towards his creation. It is because he does not show love and compassion to his creation, he turns evil.

The creation, here, is a representative character. Shelly's Frankenstein shows that the irresponsible behavior of parents affects adversely in the development of nature of the children. It shows that the children develop negative qualities in them if they are denied love, affection, and proper care. Frankenstein also affects the readers' psychology and made them ponder upon the nature of parents of modern society. It also makes the readers think if the parents can really be irresponsible like Victor Frankenstein and will parents abandon their children just because the child is ugly. It satirizes those parents who do not take the responsibility of child rearing seriously; it makes us aware about the importance of parental love and care in the positive upbringing of a child; and the denial of it can have negative affects in the mindset and behavior of the children.

Shelly's Frankenstein addresses the issue of affect of compassion and hatred in parents and especially in children. It shows the affect of denial of compassion by the parents to their children, which, in fact, is development of evil nature by the children. This is exemplified in this text by presenting the relationship between Victor Frankenstein and his creation: abandonment of creation by Victor and developing of evil character by his creation. By showing this, Shelly is emphasizing on the grave necessity of parental love and care that affects positively in the development of the children.

Work Cited