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Victor's Dual Diagnosis: An Exploration of Mental Illness in Frankensteinian Times

Hidden beneath the advances of modern psychology is a long and often macabre path that was once taken to reach an understanding about insanity. From the Middle Ages through the seventeenth century, mentally ill individuals were believed to have been impacted by some form of “witchcraft” or “demoniacal possession” (Pineal 47). Contemporary treatment methods involved beating, starving, or bleeding patients which often resulted in death (Robert et al. 77). A particularly grisly method from the Middle Ages is known as trephining. The treatment involved drilling a hole into a patient’s skull to allow the evil spirits believed to be trapped in the individual’s head to escape (Robert et al. 77). It was not until the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries that the first significant push for humane treatment approaches occurred. The reformed idea referred to as moral treatment consisted of “a therapeutic environment, occupational therapy and a social milieu” (Digby 36). William Tuke, an English Quaker, founded one of the first moral treatment facilities, a small retreat at York in 1796 (Robert et al. 78-9). The York Retreat set the precedent for many asylums by providing “detailed blueprints” of a well-kept, organized retreat that had consistent records and diagnoses (Scull 102). Doctors there began to diagnose patients with different “classifications of insanity” while recording potential causes and symptoms of mental disorders (Digby 135). Many of the different types of insanity outlined in the York Retreat’s records have similarities with several modern diagnoses (Digby

136). Linking the York Retreat's diagnosis to a modern one helps to bridge the gap between early nineteenth century and current understandings of mental illness. They also help to bridge a disconnect experienced by readers of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1831).

Throughout the novel, Victor Frankenstein undergoes a great amount of psychological trauma during his early adult life. At the age of seventeen, he suffers from the loss of his mother, and the traumatic effects of her death are what lead him to create the creature. Victor's subsequent actions produce a gap in understanding between him and the readers, leaving them unable to fully sympathize with him in his misfortunes. However, the application of a psychological approach to the novel provides an explanation for Victor's actions in that he is suffering from a mental illness. Since the creation of the York Retreat coincides with Shelley's publication of her novel, it serves as an ideal reference for contemporary diagnoses. During that time, Victor would have likely been diagnosed with monomania, otherwise known as partial insanity. However, the disconnect between Victor and readers is not fully remedied until adding a complementary modern diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder. In *Frankenstein*, Victor's dual diagnosis of monomania and antisocial personality disorder bridges the historical gap between early eighteenth century and modern society's perception of insanity, while the attribution of these two diagnoses can enable the audience to sympathize with Victor.

Although moral insanity¹ is commonly linked to personality disorders, monomania proves to be the better diagnosis of Victor's symptoms displayed throughout the novel (Digby 136). An individual diagnosed with monomania would be "partially disordered to one subject,"

¹ According to *Statistics of The Retreat*, moral insanity was a "subdivision of monomania" or partial insanity (Thurnam 28). However, different medical contemporaries provided differing terms and definitions of moral insanity such as "scheming insanity" and "monomania of imagination" (Digby 136). The diagnosis proves to have more similarities with schizophrenia than antisocial personality disorder.

while maintaining unimpaired “intellectual powers” (Prichard 6). In other words, a patient would seem to be normal under all other circumstances expect for a certain area of disillusionment. The delusion is often closely related to “the usual occupation” of the individual’s thoughts, typically regarding some form of “power, property, dignity or destination” related to the monomaniac (Prichard 29, 34). In Victor’s case, a constant “thirst for knowledge” is what causes him to exist in a “habitual state of desire or aversion, passion and feeling” (Shelley 44; Prichard 34). His “eager desire to learn” and his sense of pride in his abilities to create life are what ultimately give “rise to a partial aberration of judgment,” defining him as a monomaniac (Shelley 45; Prichard 26). However, Victor would not have necessarily been diagnosed with monomania during the time he was alive, because the diagnostic category was only added to the York Retreat during the second quarter century of the 1800s (Digby 135). There is also limited information about symptoms related to the disorder, because the diagnosis was so new at the time. Nevertheless, there are descriptions of commonalities that exist among patients who were diagnosed with partial insanity and it is the closest historically accurate diagnosis available for labeling Victor.

An “excess of self-love” is a commonality among every kind of monomania but also a specific diagnosis as well (Prichard 33). If an individual has a specific delusion associated with pride, then he or she could be diagnosed with monomania of pride. Not only does Victor possess this common symptom, he is a prime example of an individual suffering from monomania of pride. Characteristic of this type of insanity, Victor regards himself as “a favorite of heaven” as he was destined to be the creator of a new race (Prichard 33). Admitting he “trod in heaven with [his] thoughts,” Victor places himself in a special position above others, even with his negative fate (Shelley 180). His incessant desire to play God and create life is what leads to the tragic deaths of nearly all his family and friends. Readers can see Victor never learns from

his mistakes even at the end of the novel when he attempts to force his prideful ambition onto Walton and his crew. When Walton's crew approaches him wanting to turn back from their "glorious expedition," Victor asks why they would "so easily turn from [their] design" (Shelley 182). Just as he once desired to be known among men as the creator of life and know "what glory would attend the discovery," he does not understand why the men would give up on having their "names adored, as being brave men who encountered death for honour" (Shelley 47, 182). However, Walton has always seen Victor as his true self, a "slave of passion," which fulfills the prideful element of being a monomaniac (Shelley 38).

At the core of all types of monomania is a sort of mental dejection otherwise known as melancholy (Prichard 30). However, melancholy differs from mourning, which is a "period of grief" that arises from the loss of a something or someone once loved (Smith 79). Melancholy is similar, but it is a "persistent emotion" where there is an absence of mourning and a "lack of self-regard" (Smith 79). Victor experiences this kind of emotion throughout the novel in one of the "worst instances" of melancholic feelings (Prichard 30). This would be when individuals direct their melancholic thoughts "towards the evils of a future life," which is a life living in fear of the creature in Victor's case (Prichard 30). These individuals tend to toil under one delusion often pertaining to their destiny (Prichard 31). Victor is often shrouded in "dark and gloomy anticipation" (Prichard 30) of an "unavoidable" death (Shelley 164). His fears appear to subside momentarily when he is with Elizabeth, because "she alone has the power to draw [him]" from his passionate fits (Shelley 163). However, Victor only gives the "appearance of tranquility" in an effort to achieve a "deceitful calm" by concealing his underlying feelings of dread (Prichard 31). Victor does this in preparation for his marriage to Elizabeth Lavenza by concealing his feelings with "an appearance of hilarity" (Shelley 164). While he is unable to deny the feelings

of his sinking heart during what should have been the happiest day of his, Victor takes “every caution” to defend himself from any future evil by carrying weapons (Shelley 165). Unable to break away from his melancholic feelings, Victor’s brief honey moon consists of his silent “agitation” and the loss of Elizabeth which leaves him in “the agony of despair” (Shelley 167-8). Thus, Victor manages to fulfill the very type of “self-torturing imagination” seen in monomania (Prichard 30).

After reaching a diagnosis, doctors at the York Retreat became especially concerned with being able to determine the cause of a malady. According to *Statistics of The Retreat*, Victor’s age group, the early 20s, was one of three main age groups that were prevalent in the York Asylum’s admissions (Thurnam 68). The causes of these admissions were split up into two categories: predisposed and exciting causes. Predisposed causes are “long standing,” while exciting causes “immediately preceded the attack” of insanity (Thurnam 17). Each of these can be further divided into physical and moral causes. The physical causes are more often found among the predisposing causes, while the moral ones are found among the exciting causes (Thurnam 17). Victor suffers many long standing moral causes such as a “solitary mode of life” and “mental disquietude” from the loss of his mother (Thurnam 70). He admits his life at Ingolstadt was “secluded and domestic,” fulfilling this potential cause of insanity (Shelley 51). However, he also experienced several short term moral causes that include “sorrow from the death of near relatives,” “disappointed affections,” and “great changes in mode of life” again connected to the loss of his mother and his transition to living at Ingolstadt (Thurnam 71). Away at university, Victor also places himself under “excessive mental exertion” as he attempts to create life (Thurnam 71). After the creature is created, Victor experiences great amounts of “fear and terror” at its ghastly appearance (Thurnam 71). All the time Victor had spent selecting “[the

creature's] features as beautiful" only adds to his "disappointed plans and hopes" when the creation of his new race goes horribly wrong (Shelley 60; Thrunam 71). All of these are potential causes that could have led to Victor developing a type of insanity.

Although the diagnosis provided by the York Retreat is a great insight into the mind of Victor Frankenstein, the attribution of monomania is not enough to clear up any disconnect between readers and the novel. The causes are able to provide the audience some of the reasons why Victor might have been afflicted with partial insanity, but it does not provide the legitimacy that a modern psychological diagnosis does. To form a proper diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder, an individual such as Victor must meet four criteria. In Criterion A, an antisocial personality disorder is characterized by "a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others," fulfilling a minimum of three or more of the listed indicators (*DSM 659*). Victor fulfils five of the seven indicators associated with Criterion A, amounting to a strong diagnosis. In Criterion B, the individual must be 18 years of age, which Victor is for much of the novel (*DSM 659*). In Criterion C, there must be "evidence of a conduct disorder" before the individual is aged of 15 years (*DSM 659*). Evidence of this can be found in Victor's limited description of his childhood that includes ample amounts of violent language. For example, Victor's temper is sometimes "violent" as he seeks to "penetrate the secrets of nature" (Shelley 45, 47)². The final test, Criterion D, is to determine whether the occurrence of the disorder tendencies happen during schizophrenia or bipolar disorder phases (*DSM 659*). Although Victor fulfils some of the criteria for these diagnoses, there is more evidence supporting his antisocial personality diagnosis.

² Victor's unnatural obsession in a possessing something that does not belong to him and his unrelenting desire achieve these "secrets of nature" evoke an image of his quest for knowledge that is similar to a rape. He violates the laws of nature by creating new life, the actions of which are linked to this description of his childhood.

Evidence for all the criteria for an antisocial personality disorder, including the indicators, can be found throughout Victor Frankenstein's life that is chronicled in the novel. The first indicator of Criterion A pertains to Victor's "failure to conform to social norms" by "repeatedly performing acts that are grounds for arrest" (*DSM 659*). While at Ingolstadt, Victor has a somewhat unnatural obsession with death, in which "darkness [has] no effect upon [his] fancy" (Shelley 56). He separates himself from society in saying that "no one can conceive the variety of feelings" that drive his fixation with creating life (Shelley 58). Victor's behavior at university falls into all four categories of what characterizes a conduct disorder, including aggression to animals, destruction of property, theft, and serious violation of rules (*DSM 659*). In Victor's "secret toil," he admits to having "spent some months in successfully collecting" bones and body parts from charnel-houses, dissecting rooms, and slaughter-houses (Shelley 58-9). Having "tortured" live animals, Victor also rummages around in "unhallowed damp" of graves (Shelley 58). Although bodies were provided to surgeons through the Murder Act of 1752, the supply of corpses was limited (Marshall 119). The need for experimental bodies led to the "criminal practice" of grave-robbing in the early 1800s (Marshall 119). Victor explains that he "returned to [his] old habits" and stole bodies from graves, revealing that he repeatedly fails "to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behavior," thus fulfilling this indicator for antisocial personality disorder (*DSM 660*).

Victor's "deceitfulness," the second indicator, is evidenced by his obsession with secrets throughout the novel (*DSM 659*). He constantly references the "secrets of heaven and earth" that he so desperately desires to know (Shelley 45). In his pursuit of these secrets, Victor ends up utilizing secrecy as a form of deception in his relationships with his family. He sees himself as "the true murderer" of his brother William, because he was the one who created the monster

(Shelley 85). He admits to Walton that he “could not bring [himself] to disclose a secret,” or openly explain that he is the one responsible for all these tragedies to his family (Shelley 160). Not only does he admit to having “avoided explanation,” but he also continuously delays his engagement to Elizabeth with “repeated lying” about the date of their marriage (Shelley 160; *DSM* 660). Victor is often “incapable of offering any reply” and is conveniently whisked away by his issues with his creature. When he does agree to marry Elizabeth, the marriage becomes “the seal to [his] fate,” accepting the death with “a prophetic feeling” warning him of what is to come (Shelley 164). Victor’s decision to enter into a marriage with Elizabeth is also apart of the next criteria.

Victor displays a “reckless disregard for safety” of himself and Elizabeth, fulfilling the requirements for the fifth indicator of Criterion A (*DSM* 659). During the two years he spends “infusing life into an inanimate body” at Ingolstadt, Victor neglects his health, becoming “nervous to a most painful degree” (Shelley 60). He disregards seeking treatment for his developing “slow fever,” while he puts the entirety of his emotional, physical, and mental self into creating the creature (Shelley 60). There are also several instances where Victor resigns himself to death. For example, he admits to being “prepared” for his “own death” when he agrees to marry Elizabeth, knowing the creature’s intent to be “with [him] on [his] wedding-night” (Shelley 163). Victor also endangers the life of Elizabeth by deliberately avoiding the mention of the creature’s threat. Victor selfishly takes a chance on Elizabeth’s life without allowing her to have the same knowledge before entering marriage and thus “disregards the wishes, rights, [and] feelings of others” (*DSM* 660). The gamble on Elizabeth’s life ultimately leads to her death, leaving Victor alone and at fault for the part he played in her demise.

Victor displays “consistent irresponsibility,” the sixth indicator, throughout the entirety of the novel, but specifically in his relationship with the creature and Elizabeth (*DSM* 659). Prior to the creation scene, he compares himself to a father and his creature to a child. Victor declares that he deserves to “claim the gratitude of his child” more than any father before him because “a new species would bless [him] as its creator” (Shelley 58). He demonstrates possession over his creature, using phrases such as “my creation” up until the night he creates life (Shelley 60). Immediately after the creature is brought to life, Victor seeks to “avoid the wretch” and the very responsibility which comes from playing God (Shelley 62). He makes no attempts to converse with the creature, let alone discover its whereabouts, until he develops suspicions regarding the circumstances of William’s death. The creature is left to scavenge for food where he can and depends on the DeLacey’s for his language acquisition, highlighting Victor’s abandonment of his offspring and exemplifying his irresponsibility as a parent (*DSM* 661). Not only does he neglect his responsibilities to his creation, Victor also pushes off his obligations regarding his impending marriage to Elizabeth. On her deathbed, Caroline Frankenstein places her “firmest hopes of future happiness” in Victor and Elizabeth’s union, although they marry several years later (Shelley 49). Elizabeth is left alone to care for the needs of the Frankenstein family while Victor “consistently” pushes off this duty, leading Elizabeth to question if she is merely an “obstacle to [his] wishes” (*DSM* 660; Shelley 162). Ultimately, Victor’s irresponsibly and abandonment of his creature led to the deaths of William, Justine, Elizabeth, and Alphonse.

After losing all those close to him, Victor expresses a “lack of remorse” by rationalizing the death he caused others in his quest for power, fulfilling the seventh indicator (*DSM* 659). Before Victor begins to explain his “great and unparalleled misfortunes,” he claims he is attempting to save Walton from experiencing his same “fate” (Shelley 39). However, in doing

so, Victor makes it clear he accepts no responsibility for his actions and that his path was “irrevocably... determined” (Shelley 40). Victor possesses an external locus of control, attributing his guilt anywhere but on himself in order to “provide a superficial rationalization” for the outcomes of his deeds (*DSM* 660). He expresses self-pity over his destiny that “decreed [his] utter and terrible destruction” in an attempt to rationalize his out of control passion (Shelley 49). Victor is not “wretched” in the sense that great tragedies befall him by pure happenstance (Shelley 74). Rather, he is unfortunate in that he cannot accept the consequences of his actions and continues to delude himself that he is “chained in an eternal hell” (Shelley 180).

Although Victor is unable to see the fault in himself, the readers can. They are able to understand why he makes the decisions he does after surveying a combination of historical and modern diagnoses. Not only does the exploration of these two provide a better understanding of society’s perception of mental illness, it also allows the readers to fully sympathize with Victor in the way an audience does with its protagonist. An audience’s desire to sympathize with Victor suggests that there seems to be a necessity for readers to reach a sort of satisfaction by the conclusion of the novel. Yet, the desire to have all questions answered and all loose ends tied up is futile in the end. Some of the best works of literature are meant to be delightfully unsatisfying. Providing Victor with a diagnosis, or two at that, is an attempt to provide a clearer understanding into his character and the rationale behind his actions. In doing so, readers are tempted to compartmentalize Victor’s emotions and negate the sense of humanity that exists in between the lines of the novel. There is not always a diagnosis to explain why people are the way they are, because behind every set of symptoms is a human being. Behind the character of Victor Frankenstein is his own creator Mary Shelley, who necessitates readers to look into her life to find the influences that led her to create a mentally ill character in *Frankenstein*.

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