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### The Friendly Monster and the Complacent Queer: Assimilationist Approaches to Modern Adaptations of Frankenstein's Creature

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The Friendly Monster and the Complacent Queer: Assimilationist Approaches to Modern  
Adaptations of Frankenstein's Creature

From its birth in ink, Frankenstein's Creature – referred to as Creature instead of Monster to avoid confusion with the monster as a general term – has defied binaries. His very composition defies binaries; he is a compilation of previously used pieces, the best of the best as selected by his creator, Victor Frankenstein. This particular selection makes the monster neither beautiful nor hideous, but somehow a balancing of both. The Creature destroys binaries, sometimes by existing in both, sometimes by existing in neither. The Creature is so memorable because of this defiance of binaries, especially concerning his status as both victim and villain; he suffers rejection and abuse for circumstances beyond his control, but he also looks to destroy the societal structures that have rejected him, painting him as a vengeful villain. In modern media adaptations, this moral complexity is often erased in favor of being pro-monster, as well as reshaping queer aspects of the Creature into societally normative – and therefore societally acceptable – aspects. Monsters have always been a space for othered populations, and molding monsters to be normative removes that space for othered people. By molding the Creature to the norm, popular media has been using assimilationist tactics for the acceptance of the Creature and, therefore, queer people.

To lay the groundwork for a discussion on Frankenstein's Creature, we will look at Jeffery Jerome Cohen's work on monster theory. Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)"

lays the groundwork for understanding the cultural impact of monsters. In Thesis IV – “The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference” – Cohen explains the monster’s function as Other; by creating a monster – coded to represent a certain racial, sexual, economic, or social group – commentary may be made on the danger, or mistreatment, of that group (7). In Thesis III – “The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis” – Cohen posits that the real danger of the monster is its status as “a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (6). The monster resists easy categorization, making it a being designed for the act of queering. Cohen goes even further by describing the monster as “that which questions binary thinking and introduces a crisis... they demand a radical rethinking of boundary and normality” (6). This confrontation of standard categorization and boundaries can be used to incite fear in an audience, but it can also be used to incite social change. In representing the others, monsters, especially those portrayed in a complex manner, queer the narratives they inhabit.

Halberstam drives forward this idea of associating monsters with people in their book *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Starting with the monster’s status in the nineteenth century, Halberstam notes how their appearance in nineteenth century literature is “a symptomatic moment in which boundaries between good and evil, health and perversity, crime and punishment, truth and deception, inside and outside dissolve and threaten the integrity of the narrative itself” (*Skin* 2). However, instead of just placing the monster on the Other, Halberstam acknowledges that people have come to associate the monster with the Self. The threat to normalcy is not just an exterior one; it is an interior one, as “the one [the monstrous] is always buried within the other [the self]” (*Skin* 26). This internal monstrosity does not have to be negative; instead, Halberstam views this internal monstrosity as an opportunity to recognize the human condition, or the lack thereof: “the monster, in fact, is where we come to know ourselves

as never-human, as always between humanness and monstrosity” (*Skin* 37). Halberstam sees this identity with the self as a hopeful turn towards changing how we identify both ourselves and others. Halberstam says that monsters “make strange the categories of beauty, humanity, and identity that we still cling to” (*Skin* 6), and when one identifies with those who “make strange” identity, they can recognize it as strange within themselves. Halberstam also notices this trend in identifying the Self with the monster has directed people toward questioning power structures and conventional ideas of morality and value:

“we no longer attempt to identify the monster and fix the terms of his/her deformity, rather postmodern Gothic warns us to be suspicious of monster hunters, monster makers, and above all, discourses invested in purity and innocence. The monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities and so we need monsters and we need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities” (*Skin* 27).

This view of monsters not only creates a space of positive identification with the Other; it also creates a space of critique of normative culture and existing power structures. Monsters are the key to creating a space for queer identities as well as reforming the existing systems of value and power.

Halberstam then focuses specifically on the Creature, who they refer to as either ‘Frankenstein’s monster’ or ‘the monster’. Halberstam views the Creature as a sexual other, focusing on the perceived sexual threat that the Creature poses: “As a sexual being, Frankenstein’s monster is foreign and as an outsider to the community, his foreign sexuality is monstrous and threatens miscegenation. Frankenstein’s lonely monster is driven out of town by the mob when he threatens to reproduce” (*Skin* 6). The Creature is a product of ‘unnatural’ reproduction, and thus threatens to continue such methods of ‘unnatural’ reproduction. Halberstam connects this with the fear of ‘unnatural’ reproduction within people: “By focusing

upon the body as a locus of fear, Shelley's novel suggests that it is people (or at least bodies) who terrify people, not ghosts or gods, devils or monks, windswept castles or labyrinthine monasteries" (*Skin* 29). This fear of 'unnatural' reproduction in other human beings is placed onto the Creature. The Creature is made even more monstrous by being "a fugitive from identity" (*Skin* 37), and when this outlaw from social norms becomes a model for audiences, how we portray the Creature becomes crucial. Halberstam notes that in Gothic fiction, including *Frankenstein*, the story "usually resolves boundary disputes by the end of the novel by killing off the monster and restoring law and order" (*Skin* 36). Shelley does this in her novel, but in modern adaptations of the Creature, the Creature often survives. Instead, these adaptations restore social order by assimilating the Creature into the normative culture.

Despite its seeming conservative ending with the death of the Creature, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* queered many of the familial conventions of the time. Firstly, Shelley queered the birthing process; Victor, a singular man, brings his creation to life on his own, creating an asexual reproductive process of sorts. The body of the monster itself is a queering of the natural body; his unusually large body is made of parts collected from "the dissecting room and the slaughter-house" (Shelley 34). Most queerly of all, and in true monster fashion, the Creature defies binary categorization. He is neither undead, nor a fully new being. He is a mix of beautiful and hideous features – "his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes" (Shelley 35) – which causes Victor to be unsure if the Creature is really either. Most importantly, the Creature defies categorization as a character functioning within the novel. He is neither fully victim, nor fully villain; instead he is a fascinating mix of both. His brutal, and often violent,

rejection by the people he encounters is due to factors outside of his control; however, he chooses to use the anger from his violent rejection to fuel his violent vengeance.

The Creature's turn to malevolence occurs after a scene in the novel where he attempts to enter a family unit. The Creature, after fleeing into the woods on the night of his birth, comes across a little cottage where a blind man, De Lacey, and his two grown children, one daughter and one son, reside (Shelley 73). The Creature stays in a hovel by the cottage and learns how to speak and read, as well as learning various subjects, by overhearing the lessons being given to the son's fiancé. During this period, the Creature helps the De Lacey family by doing chores for them while they sleep (Shelley 77). The Creature eventually gathers the courage to approach the father so that he may find love and companionship with the family. The father, due to his visual impairment, does not cast judgement upon the Creature at first, though he does harbor suspicion (Shelley 93). Unfortunately, the rest of the family returns home during this conversation, and the son immediately attacks the Creature, who he views as a threat to the security of his family (Shelley 94). This threat is not just contained to the De Lacey family, David A. Hedrich Hirsch asserts in their piece "Liberty, Equality, Monstrosity: Revolutionizing the Family in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*". Instead the Creature is a threat to the family structure as a whole; to allow the Creature into the De Lacey family would be to allow foreign elements to invade and reshape the nuclear family structure (Hirsch 118). When the Creature seemed to be normative, he was readily welcomed into the family. At the reveal of his non-normative status, a non-normativity that could not be adapted into the normative family structure, the Creature is brutally attacked and rejected. The Creature, instead of attempting to adapt to another normative group, sees the flaws within the normative family structure and symbolically burns the cottage down – after, of course, the family has fled (Shelley 97). The Creature is not attempting to be normal and

assimilate into a normative family structure; instead, he seeks to dispose of the normative family structure altogether.

One of the most faithful adaptations of the Frankenstein story in modern media is found in the 2014 television series *Penny Dreadful*. In this show's Victorian London, characters from various gothic novels work together to fight dark forces. One such set of characters is Victor Frankenstein and his creations, the first of which is a close adaptation of the original Creature. He selects the name John Clare for himself, after the poet of the same name ("Fresh Hell"). His non-normative appearance causes many of his problems in the first season, such as his inability to find a job when he leaves Victor's abandoned study and his failed attempts to connect with other human beings, even more so when it comes to romantic/sexual relationships. In a normative fashion, John Clare's romantic/sexual interests are solely women. Additionally, in the final season, he recovers memories from his previous life, revealing both that he was the head of a traditional familial structure, but also that he was not constructed from various parts but is instead a singular body that was resurrected ("The Day Tennyson Died"). John Clare seems non-normative at the start of the series, but with each revelation, he adheres more and more to the norms of Victorian London and modern white western culture.

In *American Horror Story: Coven*, another Creature is brought to life, this time in the form of a frat boy, Kyle, who is resurrected after his tragic death in a bus accident with his fellow fraternity members. This birth is further queered from the original; instead of a solitary man creating life, two young women perform the resurrection. The two witches stitch Kyle back together, filling in the missing pieces with parts of Kyle's dead friends ("Boy Parts"). Despite this patchwork job, Kyle has a normative appearance. It is not until a later scene where his mother, who is revealed to have been sexually abusing Kyle, remarks that his body is different.

Kyle murders his mother but is morally absolved of the crime due to his status as survivor of his mother's abuse ("The Replacements"). He then willingly works for the Coven to which his creators belong. Not only does Kyle pass for normative, he also willingly returns to the social order that created him, maintaining his status as a 'friendly' monster.

While these examples demonstrate how the Creature is portrayed for a mature audience, a cultural analysis of the Creature would be incomplete without examining how the Creature is portrayed in children's media. These depictions of monsters are some of the earliest with which children come in contact. Additionally, they are the perfect opportunity to represent non-normative ideas, as children, Halberstam points out in "The Queer Art of Failure," possess "a total indifference to adult conceptions of success and failure" (120). The queer fairy tales Halberstam describes seem perfect for monster narratives, with their "heroes who are in some way "different" and whose difference is offensive to some larger community" and the connection of the hero's struggle with the "larger struggles of the dispossessed" ("Queer" 120). With this perfect opportunity to have monsters in queer narratives, how does contemporary children's media depict adaptations of Frankenstein's Creature?

The 2008 film *Igor* introduces the protagonist, Igor, who is part of a social class comprised entirely of people with hunchbacks, all of whom are called Igor and forced to be the assistant to an evil scientist. Every year, there is a competition for the evil scientists to create the vilest invention. When Igor's evil scientist dies, he uses the opportunity to create his own evil invention to enter the contest, hoping to change his kingdom's view of Igors. Igor constructs a body from parts of various sizes and then brings it to life, quickly realizing that it – or rather she – is benevolent. He cries in despair, "You're supposed to be evil!" to which she responds, slowly and clumsily, "Eva," naming herself from her creator's intention for her (*Igor*). Eva's birth

maintains the queer nature of the original text; she is created by a singular man – with the support of his two masc-identifying friends. Eva’s body is also remarkably queer; her stature causes her to loom over every other character in the film, and she is disproportionate, most notably in her wildly different arms. However, this is the limit of her nonconformity. Eva defies the norms of her society by championing kindness and benevolence and refusing to participate in the culture of evil deeds. She convinces Igor that he is not truly evil, and together, with the help of their two friends, Eva and Igor overthrow the people in power and reshape their culture around kindness and goodness (*Igor*). While this narrative concludes with a shift in power and cultural norms, it conforms to the established norms for the viewer, reaffirming the normative values of the viewer’s culture as the ‘right’ values.

Not to be forgotten is the teenaged incarnation of the Creature attending a homogenously monstrous high school, Frankie Stein from the *Monster High* series of novels, videos, and movies. In the first novel, Frankie is revealed to have two parents, a mother and a father (Harrison). This effectively unqueers the birth by returning the process of birth to a heterosexual couple. Additionally, this heterosexual couple does what they can to ensure their daughter fits in with her classmates. No detailed description of Frankie is given in the novel, but upon seeing the videos presented on the official Monster High website, it is clear to see that Frankie’s body is from the same mold as that of all the other monsters. This should be no surprise, considering the franchise was created to sell a line of dolls who, though claiming to be waving their ‘freak flags’ and sporting individual ‘freaky flaws’, all conform to the same body type. Interestingly, in the novel, Frankie is an agent of social change. She refuses to remain closeted with the rest of the monsters, who pass themselves as humans, or ‘normies’, in order to escape the anger and violence of an ignorant majority. Through her actions, monsters are eventually able to openly

participate in society, without having to hide their monstrousness – in essence, their queerness.

In the videos and movies, however, Frankie's role as agent of social change is removed. She attends an all-monster high school, where she exists in the majority. The monsters are not considered monstrous, as their monstrousness is the norm. While they are still allowed to be monsters, they are the norm, removing their queer nature that might cause them to be a disruptive force. Once again, in the transition from novel to visual media, the Creature's function of challenging the norm is removed, and the Creature is assimilated into the norm.

All of these versions of the Creature assimilate into the culture presented to them instead of questioning that culture. One might ask why the Creature can't assimilate; isn't it a step in the right direction for the Creature to be accepted? Unfortunately, no, it is not, if the terms of the Creature's acceptance are, firstly, erasure of as much of their queerness as possible and, secondly, their compliance in harmful social structures. If the Creature is a queer figure, as Halberstam seems to suggest, then the assimilationist approaches to the Creature suggest that queer people should assimilate instead of resist. In the publication *Queers Read This*, multiple anonymous pieces emphasize the importance of resistance, of refusing to assimilate. In "Shout It!" the author asks the reader to "Do whatever you need to do to tear yourself away from your customary state of acceptance" (*Queers* 6). They emphasize this necessity by saying, "In 1969, Queers fought back. In 1990, Queers say ok. Next year, will we be here?" (*Queers* 6). By assimilating, by accepting the norm, the author seems to say, queer people allow their queerness to be erased, ultimately turning into the erasure of themselves entirely. In "Why Queer," the author reminds readers of the importance of "telling ourselves we don't have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized" (*Queers* 12). Instead of molding themselves to suit heteronormative and cisnormative culture, the author encourages readers to

embrace their queerness. Queer people should not be made as normative as possible, smiling and waving from their assimilated lives; monsters should not become friendly, smiling images of a reformed Other.

Monsters exist as a space to represent Othered populations. While originally used to create fear for the other, the moral complexity of Frankenstein's Creature has created a space to question the assumed negativity of the Other. It is especially important to examine the function of the Creature in popular culture due to its wide reach. While literature is highly influential and useful, popular culture, especially television and film, is how the majority of the population of the United States is exposed to ideas. Therefore, television and film are crucial in influencing the attitudes of the population. The representation of Othered populations in film and television influences the general attitudes toward those populations. While the monster-positive films and television currently being created are a step forward from generating fear, they effectively pacify the monsters. The Creature's main threat is his vengeful anger, using the pain from his rejection and abuse to act against the societal structures that rejected him. To make the Creature easily accepted by general populations, popular culture removes some, if not all, of the queer aspects of the Creature; always they rid the Creature of its anger, turning it into a pitiable victim of prejudice. Like the complacent queer in popular culture, who just wants to be accepted into the destructive social structures, the friendly monster wants to prove that despite physical difference, they are just like everyone else. This removes the undercurrent of societal upheaval found in the Frankenstein story, making it 'safe' for popular consumption. It's time we let the Creature be angry again; let it rage against the heteronormative nuclear family. The monster is dangerous; as Cohen points out, "its threat is its propensity to shift" (5). When we let the Creature's propensity to shift culture stand, we can continue narratives of structural change.

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