

# Pity and revenge in frankenstein and the cry of the children



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Both the poem *The Cry of the Children* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley portray acts of cruelty in an attempt to arouse pity from readers. The victims in each case feel bitter self-pity and respond with resentment towards those who wrong them. The working class children in the poem and the Monster in *Frankenstein* are pitiful characters because of how they are treated, but they are not completely helpless. They still can exercise free will and choose how to react to their treatment. There is a great difference in their outward dispositions even though their initial sentiments are similar. Both authors create characters that suffer injustices and desire pity, but their characters' responses to their challenges determine whether or not they deserve the readers' sympathy. The children in Browning's poem feel sorrow and general despair towards their lives. They look forward to death, saying, "It is good when it happens" (Browning, line 51). The children are brave about something that is universally feared. Browning uses the children's unexpected outlook to show how they cope with hardships. They tell those who suggest that they should leave their work and play in the countryside to "Leave us ... from your pleasures fair and fine!" (Browning, lines 63-64). The work never seems to end, as Browning stresses by using the phrase "all day" three times between lines 73 to 77. Browning emphasizes the children's misery by showing how they do not even want to think of running and playing: "If we cared for any meadows, it were merely/To drop down in them and sleep" (Browning, lines 67-68). The children are resentful towards those who do not sympathize with them, but they do not dwell on things they cannot have. In contrast, the Monster in Shelley's novel allows himself to be consumed by his sorrow until it turns to anger. Early in the story, he is similar to the children in Browning's

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poem. When he is alone and cold in the forest he sits down and weeps (Shelley 68). However after being rejected by the family he tries to befriend, he says, “ despair had not yet taken possession of me; my feelings were those of rage and revenge” (Shelley 92). The family rejects the monster, but they do not force any further hardships on him. His sorrow is justifiable, but his anger is not. The Monster continues, saying, “ I did not strive to control them; but, allowing myself to be borne away by the stream, I bent my mind towards injury and death” (Shelley 93). The Monster willfully builds up hatred in his heart. Shelley wears away the pity that the audience may feel for the Monster by slowly revealing his cruelty. Meanwhile, in Browning’s poem, the children’s response to the injustices they face is that they lack goodness, not that they should embrace evil. They have no faith, for they have received no religious instruction, as is shown in stanza 10 when they say that they only know two words of a single prayer. They also lack faith in God’s benevolence. They say, “ grief has made us unbelieving” (Browning, line 131). Browning’s readers would have seen faithless children as a tragedy. Browning, however, shows why her young protagonists think that God does not hear them. They say, “ the human creatures near us/Pass by, hearing not, or answer not a word.” (Browning, lines 107-108). It is their simple reasoning that makes them doubt God, rather than any sort of innate cruelty. The Monster’s reasoning is selfish and biased. He attempts to portray himself as innocent and striving for goodness but contradicts himself on multiple occasions. He claims that he “ felt the greatest ardour for virtue rise within me, and abhorrence for vice” (Shelley 87). However, he also admits that he feels a “ bitter gall of envy” (Shelley 87) when he sees the happiness of the family he watches. He feels entitled to a share in their happiness. He views the

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scientist, Frankenstein, as a God-like figure for having created him, but curses the man for leaving him alone (Shelley 88). The Monster cannot blame anyone for needlessly inflicting such emotional pain on him, but feels wronged because he sees pleasures in the world that he cannot access. Even the children in Browning's poem do not claim a right to happiness or curse God for their misery. All the children desire is peace. The Monster is capable of sustaining himself without aid and could be free from oppression, but could not be satisfied with this kind of life. Regarding the family he observes, he says, " my heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures" (Shelley 89). The monster's desire for love is not a crime, but the resulting anger and plans for revenge make him guilty. He imposes himself on others and is angry when they reject him. Like the Monster, the children feel that their Creator does not love them, if He exists (Browning, lines 125-135). Their reaction, however, is only weeping. The Monster soon determines that Frankenstein is his enemy, referring to him as " him towards whom I have sworn eternal revenge" (Shelley 97). He blames Frankenstein for all the suffering he experiences. Frankenstein, meanwhile, is not guilty of directly harming the Monster. He admittedly does not love or care for the Monster either, but this does directly connect to the hatred that the Monster feels towards him. When the Monster captures a boy and learns that he is related to Frankenstein, the Monster strangles him out of hatred for Frankenstein. He even relishes this murderous act, saying " my heart swelled with exultation and hellish triumph" (Shelley 97). The Monster believes that he is justified in seeking revenge because of his unsatisfying existence. He says, " I am malicious because I am miserable" (Shelley 98), implying that misery is sufficient justification for murder. He talks as though he is a victim of far

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greater injustices than those he was endured. He asserts that he will not submit to “ abject slavery” (Shelley 98), yet there are none who wish to enslave him in any way. He demonstrates that he is capable of deep thought, but persists in trying to justify his crimes in ways that far exceed any committed against him. Unlike the Monster, the Children are forced to work in slave- like conditions. They are oppressed and suffer much greater physical hardships than being unloved. Yet, even as small children, they have more strength of character and forbearance than the Monster. They do feel resentment with their sorrow; “ the child’s sob in the silence curses deeper/Than the strong man in his wrath” (Browning, lines 159 -160). Even in this state, they do not harbour thoughts of revenge and murder. Browning wrote her poem in order to arouse pity from her audience. Her characters maintain a certain level of virtue despite their youth and the cruelty they experience, and therefore would have won her readers over. Shelley’s Monster inspires pity at first, but it soon turns to disgust. Shelley’s work has more depth because it is more than a tragedy or a horror story. It is an example of behaviourism. The Monster tries to claim that his actions are the result of his surroundings and the actions of others; “ Shall I respect man when, he contemns me?” (Shelley 98). He ruins his chances of pity or sympathy by making the choice to inflict suffering on others who can’t or won’t give him love. His crimes are premeditated. He says, “ I will watch with the wiliness of the snake, that I may sting with its venom” (Shelley 116). Browning’s work forces her readers to face society and understand the victims of hardship, while Shelley’s work makes readers consider the reasons for unhappiness within themselves. Works Cited: Browning, Elizabeth. The Cry of the Children. Norton Anthology of English Literature. 8th ed. Eds. Julia <https://assignbuster.com/pity-and-revenge-in-frankenstein-and-the-cry-of-the-children/>

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