

# How binary oppositions are shown in frankenstein

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



A binary opposition refers to a pair of related non-physical elements that are opposite in meaning; it is an important concept of Structuralism which defines the contrast between two mutually exclusive terms. Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* is rich in these contrasts and none are more relevant and remarkable as the oppositions allegorised in the relationship between Victor and his creature. These can be separated into seven binaries which interlink, blend, blur and mutate to deconstruct the text; creator and created, civilized and savage, inclusion and rejection, love and hate, life and death, good and evil, and freewill and determinism. Between each of these there exists a boundary, a human-applied liminal threshold which divides the two and creates the opportunity for the swapping, shifting and breaking down between the two characters to procure only misery and suffering as Victor dies and the creature disappears into 'darkness and distance'.

Binary oppositions in themselves are exceptionally problematic as the contrast between two mutually exclusive terms is difficult to define and separate. When we envisage two elements that are opposed in meaning or significance we often see only two entities that lie on opposite ends of a spectrum and negate the infinite mass of possibilities which lie between them. Furthermore, we incorrectly imagine a clear-cut boundary between the two which is as negotiable as the forward slash between light/dark. Whilst as humans we are capable of identifying the difference between light and dark, or hot and cold, the boundary between the pair is fabricated entirely from human subjectivity as stated in the Protagorean maxim, 'man is the measure of all things' and therefore compelled to disintegration. In terms of hot and cold, we place our perception as the fulcrum of measurement; we

are comfortable in our climate at anywhere around twenty degrees Celsius, anything distinctly above or below this is branded hot or cold without a moment's consideration for another body's subjective opinion, or the concept of infinity (there is no limit to how hot or cold something can be) and the perpetual decimals in temperature shift which may completely alter a state of being; this demolishes the notion that there is some kind of imaginable boundary where one can cross from hot to cold or vice versa. This is complicated immensely if we replace temperature with morality, the binary opposition between good and evil, as subjectivity shreds any possibility of a shared human knowledge which would allow for an easier understanding of hot and cold. By this means, the boundary between good and evil is non-existent, yet we still place value on the two as a binary opposition.

In addition, no two binary opposites are of equal merit, an idea developed by Claude Levi-Strauss and Jacques Derrida who both commented on the necessity of a 'dominant' element in binaries; it is a fundamental element of human nature to organise everything into hierarchal order. This dominant element is the 'presence' and is positive and the other the 'absence' or 'lack', which is negative. Cold is thereby the 'lack' of heat and evil the absence of good; heat and goodness are the 'presence'. However, as Nietzsche alludes to in his essay *On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense*, this attribution of the 'positive' and 'negative' is simply a 'human construct'; there is nothing innately negative about coldness or darkness or evil or even the word negative, it is simply something that humanity has deemed non-beneficial and therefore 'bad'. Shelley explores this notion in her

deconstruction of the binary between Frankenstein and his creature. Victor is at first represented to be the former, 'presence', and the positive and the creature the latter, 'absence' and negative. Almost every binary opposition, where Victor was the positive and his creature the negative, is blurred and reversed. At first Victor overcomes the laws of nature in creating his creature, but in destroying his machinery in the sea the binary of Science and Nature is inverted as the natural sea swallows the scientific technology. Victor's physical creation leads to his mental destruction and the creature's acquisition of knowledge leads to his mental development. The creature desires integration into society and Victor desires to escape from it. The creature wants to live happily and Victor wants to die fighting. The creature wants to be equal by having a wife and Victor loses all of his family because he refuses to allow his creature one. The creature is at first determined entirely by Victor, but in learning of the nature of life with the DeLacey's he gains a level of free-will, meanwhile Victor is enslaved by the threat to all of his loved ones; this notion is epitomised in the creature's line 'you made me but now you are my slave'.

In the Structuralist theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, units of language are defined by signs indicating what they are not as 'in language there are only differences'. These opposing relative and negative signs derive from the syntagmatic and paradigmatic context of conceptual and phonic differences meaning that 'language is a form and not a substance'. Saussure would argue that there is the idea of a 'something' and 'not something' within this form which defines signs and creates binary oppositions. This holds true when referring to physical entities; here there is only the presence and the

lack. The opposite of the moon is not the sun, but no moon, the creature learns this in his coming to terms with the world and the DeLaceys in Volume II chapters III to V. The creature follows a process akin to Saussure's notion of differences to 'learn to distinguish between the operations of my various senses'. He does this through discovering series of binary opposites, the first of which is light and dark; the creature is blinded by the light before 'darkness then came over me and troubled me' and then 'light poured in on me again'. This greatly confuses the creature and leaves him as a 'poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing'. This shows that a lack of binaries leads to suffering and blending binaries also causes suffering, there is only joy when there is a comfortable equilibrium of the two, which is almost impossible. In identifying physical objects such as the moon/not moon, stream/not stream, foliage/not foliage, the creature is confused binaries as they are not opposites but lack or absence of the thing itself. In learning conceptual language with the DeLacey family the creature learns that some words produced 'pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness' and reflects on this language of opposites as a 'godlike science'. He learns of 'fire, milk, wood, bread' through what they physically point to, but has difficulty when it comes to 'good' 'dearest and happy' as they rely on opposites to be identified. If words do not have an intrinsic valuable meaning, then the monster is not a monster until he is named 'the wretch, the filthy demon' by Victor; he is allocated a place within the system before he has even done anything monstrous. This deconstructs the binary idea that Frankenstein and his creature are opposites.

Whilst the notion of conceptual opposition is certainly recognisable in Frankenstein, as with the idea of the creator and the created, the more prevalent and interesting themes of the novel occur in the grey area between and the imaginary border which separate binary oppositions which gives way for shifts; as with the creator and created binary: 'you made me but now you are my slave'. These boundaries are a kind of liminal threshold between states, yet are far more complicated and ambiguous than a simple border line between two states. This idea is tangible in Shelley's deconstruction of binary oppositions; she begins her novel at this metaphorical border, with Victor on the scientific border of great discovery and Walton on the geographical border of the North Pole. Furthermore, both are trapped in a liminal limbo; the Victor through his mental capacity and Walton through the physical polar ice. Victor manages to overstep his boundary and create the creature who becomes his binary opposition, however over the course of events in the novel this binary is shifted immensely, the new border (between creation/created, civilized/savage, inclusion/rejection, love/hate, life/death, good/evil, and freewill/determinism) is swapped, shifted and broken down until Victor loses everything and dies. Frankenstein crosses the liminal border of science and creates a creature that then destroys everything Victor ever loved. Walton, who sees this and decided ultimately not to cross the literal geographic border, is allowed to live and return to the comfort of home.

The relationship between Frankenstein and his creature is far more complicated and contains far more ambiguous binaries than classical representations of antithetical characters such as God and Satan in Milton's

Paradise Lost, which is constantly referred to throughout Frankenstein. The separation between heaven and hell and good and evil is exceptionally clear cut, Shelley employs this as a reference to depict how the nameless creature is somewhere between Satan and Adam and throw our sympathy between Victor and the innocent and helpless creature. This is epitomised in the creature's line ' I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed'. Analysing Umberto Eco's essay The Narrative Structure in Fleming and James Bond as the ultimate depiction of perfect binary oppositions further demonstrates the lack of clear cut binaries and the blending which occurs in Frankenstein. Bond and Villain are absolute opposites where Bond is the ' Anglo-Saxon, masculine and loving' protagonist and the Villain is the ' foreign, impotent and sexually deviant' antagonist, or ' variant' to Bond. The creature is in no way comparable to these villains, as he wants to love and live as a human, and Victor wishes to die fighting the creature. Terry Eagleton argues that we ' cannot catapult ourselves beyond this binary habit of thought into an ultra-metaphysical realm', so we can only form understanding of the world through the discovery of opposites. However he goes on to say that ' one term of antithesis secretly inheres within the other.' The idea that an element of every entity exists within their opposite is fascinating when applied to the creature and Frankenstein. In many ways they are one and the same person and it is the creatures attributes which are similar to a ' good' human, mingled with the fact that he is not a human which produces horror; as Diana Fuss states in her 1996 book Human, All Too Human, ' sameness, not difference, provokes our greatest anxiety' .

The opposition of inclusion and rejection, situated within good and evil in Frankenstein and the creature, is another primary example of the mutation of binaries through the breakdown of boundaries. On his first discovery of evidence of humanity, a supposed blessing of the fire left by 'wandering beggars', he quickly 'thrusts' his hand 'into the live embers' only to unearth the harshness of the human inferno and see his 'joy' turn to a 'cry of pain'. This is a very early metaphor for the creature's attempt at inclusion in humanity, but he is burned through his ignorance of amorality. 'How strange' he reflects 'that the same cause should produce such opposite effects'. The creature is intrinsically moral; he never once fights back, and maintains the belief that he is 'the same cause' as humanity and therefore can be part of it. The creature, however, is not part of the same cause. Humans are created from 'nothing' in a sense that they begin as an unimaginably small element and grow and develop, Frankenstein's creature does not grow or develop, he is created out of chaos from mixed parts of other humans, and therefore he is not human and devoid of many human traits. Humans gain morality from experience but the creature already has innate knowledge as he is built from other humans who have already gained it; why else would he know instantly to eat berries and not branches or twigs?

Finally, Victor Frankenstein, like Faustus and Icarus, is the epitome of the hyper-ambitious man who seeks to transcend his corporeal imprisonment and reside in the realm of divine authority having attained absolute truth; he wishes to reject himself from humanity by escaping it. However, Victor is a man and will always be a man; he is tries not be a man by surpassing the



laws of humanity and playing God, and is therefore punished with suffering through the death of loved ones and ultimately his own death. The creature, although he is built out of man, is not a man and so will never be accepted as one. However he exists (or at least tries to exist) in a man's world (or at least a world entirely defined by the ideas of man). Therefore by trying to become part of it in wanting acceptance into the social life of men and wanting a woman (which is in the patriarchal society a man's possession), he is committing the same illicit offence to transcend his place and is condemned to the same fate of his creator; death and suffering. Both Victor and the creature overstep the boundaries of whom they are and who they can be which break down binary oppositions and cause suffering.

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