

THE MANIFESTATION OF COMPLEX PTSD IN FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER

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ABSTRACT: This research employs the Complex Trauma Screener to diagnose Frankenstein's monster with Complex PTSD, attributed to trauma inflicted by both his creator and society. The creature exhibits all seven major symptoms of Complex PTSD, manifesting through vivid nightmares, intense feelings of loneliness and worthlessness, avoidance of populated areas due to fear of rejection, and eventual aggression resulting from persistent ostracization. Complex PTSD is an emerging topic of interest in modern psychology, especially in the context of childhood trauma. Hence, Frankenstein's monster could potentially serve as a model to aid victims and medical professionals alike.

KEYWORDS: Frankenstein; Psychology; Complex PTSD; Childhood trauma

On that fateful stormy night, a jolt of electricity not only brought life to an inanimate object, but also doomed it to eternal solitude. In the literary classic *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, Frankenstein's monster has long served as a symbol for societal rejection and alienation. However, when viewing Shelley's work from the lens of modern psychology, it seems that the creature can prove to be a compelling representation of the symptoms of major traumatic disorders. Using the Complex Trauma Screener, established in 2024 by Justin Litvin, it is evident that Frankenstein's monster exhibits all of the major symptoms of Complex PTSD, as a result of his adverse experiences with his creator and society as a whole. This screener consists of 7 major symptoms: having strong memories and nightmares, experiencing overwhelming loneliness, feeling worthless, avoiding certain places, being overly watchful, having trouble feeling happy, and being excessively aggressive (Litvin et al. 2).

Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or Complex PTSD, is a mental condition resulting from chronic trauma. Although chronic trauma is not a recent

phenomenon, this diagnosis is relatively new and has only been incorporated into the International Classification of Diseases as of 2024. The symptoms of Complex PTSD include prominent symptoms of PTSD, such as flashbacks and nightmares, in addition to unique symptoms such as impairment in self-regulation and interpersonal functioning (Everett et al. 58). It is often diagnosed in populations who have experienced child abuse, as repeated traumatic events at a young age causes a manifestation of behaviors and emotions that cannot be completely captured by the diagnosis of PTSD.

As child abuse is one of the root causes of Complex PTSD, it is clear that Victor's imprudent parenting had a significant impact on the creature's psyche. In "Filthy Creation: the Problem of Parenting in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," Debapriya Goswami investigates various signs of Victor's deficient parenting, like the state of his laboratory, the concept of ugliness, and, most relevantly, Victor's actions towards the monster. When discussing his actions, Goswami states that Victor Frankenstein was at fault for not taking accountability of his creation, as he abandoned the creature and chose not to name it. The paper notes that, based on philosophical literature such as *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* by Sara Ruddick, there are 3 stages of parenting. Victor's actions were deemed as insufficient in all of them. He chose not to work towards preserving his creation and was unable to meet any of the creature's emotional or psychological needs (Goswami 5). Furthermore, he doesn't help the creature find its place in society. Frankenstein's monster is painfully aware that "no father had watched [his] infant days" and "no mother had blessed [him] with smiles and caresses," thus causing the creature to feel a sense of rejection (Shelley 82). Victor is even the first person to call his own creature ugly, leading to more psychological damage and causing the creature to feel isolated from the rest of the world (101). These actions can be likened to child abuse, as he abandoned his creation immediately after bringing it to life. Thus, Victor's neglect during its formative years leaves the monster to fend for itself, ultimately leading to the manifestation of various symptoms of Complex PTSD.

One of the most prominent symptoms of Complex PTSD is having vivid nightmares and memories of the traumatic experiences, which the creature clearly exhibits in the aftermath of societal rejection. As he recounts his life's experiences to Victor, the monster is able to remember each and every detail. He

narrates the story of his birth, where he “saw, felt, heard, and smelt, at the same time,” which he found to be a “strange multiplicity of sensations” (32). As the monster continues his narrative, it is evident that his vivid memories are not just due to having an excellent memory but due to the trauma induced by these experiences. The monster even spoke of the “the huts, the neater cottages, and stately houses” that comprised the village from which he was cruelly driven out of (42). His ability to describe these seemingly random details to Victor suggests that these memories are vivid in the creature’s mind, most likely due to the significance of these moments in inciting fear and confusion. These emotions not only cause him to remember every aspect of his experiences but also lead to physical symptoms, such as the monster’s inability to sleep. Frankenstein’s monster struggled with staying asleep at night, and often woke up in a state of horror, where a “cold dew covered [his] forehead, [his] teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed.” The physical symptoms he experiences, from the cold sweat to the muscle spasms, indicate the true intensity of his nightmare and the panic that accompanied it. After being chased away by the villagers, he “started up at night, agitated by the dreadful scene of the preceding day.” The creature felt entrapped by “the strangest power,” emphasizing the overwhelming potency of his emotions (58). Through his recall of his traumatic past, it is evident that the monster holds extremely vivid recollections of his past experiences and also suffers from debilitating insomnia. As these symptoms worsen, they also influence the creature’s sense of self.

Throughout the book, Frankenstein’s monster struggles with intense feelings of loneliness and worthlessness, which align with two of the criteria on the Complex Trauma Screener. Immediately after bringing his creation to life, “breathless horror and disgust filled [Victor’s] heart,” leading him to rush out of the room and abandon his monster (99). Victor’s actions during this scene mark the beginning of the monster’s life of isolation, where the creature is forced to learn about the world without any guidance from his creator. This is further shown when the creature is first awakened, as he felt “cold...and half-frightened as it were instinctively, finding [himself] so desolate” (34). While describing his life to Victor, the monster mentions that “every where [he sees] bliss, from which [he] alone [is] irrevocably excluded” (26). As everyone continued to treat him as an outsider, the monster began to internalize their views, eventually believing

that he was in fact not worthy of living. After the villagers reacted violently to the creature, he began to wonder if he was a “monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled” (80). Additionally, as he continues to recount his life’s experiences to Victor, the monster expresses anger and sadness towards his “cursed, cursed creator” for giving him life, and considers “[extinguishing] the spark of existence which [Victor] had so wantonly bestowed” (120). From the moment of his creation, which immediately incited Victor’s rejection, to being shunned by society, Frankenstein’s monster experienced significant psychological distress, causing him to feel alone and abandoned in a world he wasn’t familiar with. Consequently, he began to internalize the harsh judgements of those around him, leading him to believe that he wasn’t worthy of life. The creature’s low self-esteem is reflected in his actions, as he becomes cautious and avoidant in regard to social interactions.

Those affected by Complex PTSD tend to be avoidant and extremely watchful, which is exhibited in Frankenstein’s monster as he continues to experience rejection and violence. In terms of avoidance, many evade places and people that serve as reminders of their traumatic experiences. The creature chooses to retreat into less populated places, such as “the desert mountains and glaciers,” out of fear (27). His feelings are exacerbated after he attempts to enter a village in hopes of being integrated into a community. “The children shrieked, and one of the women fainted” the second they beheld Frankenstein’s monster, and “some fled, some attacked” him. Shocked by their reaction, the creature “escaped to the open country, and fearfully took refuge in a low hovel” (42). He continued to stay in the dilapidated hovel for a significant portion of his life, intentionally avoiding all interactions with people. He even ensured that he never “ventured abroad during daylight” as he was scared of encountering a similar treatment as before (76). This fear of being rejected by society also led to a sense of caution and vigilance. The monster became extremely aware of the potential threats that accompanied speaking with strangers. When he came across the DeLacey family in their cottage, he chose to keep his distance and “remain quietly in [his] hovel, watching” them instead (53). For months on end, the creature lived near the cottagers, longing to be a part of their small family. He even developed a rough daily schedule, where he planned on “observing [his] friends” in the evenings. As he spent more time making these observations, he

developed a strong emotional connection to the DeLaceys, where he would envision “a thousand pictures” of how he would introduce himself to them and their subsequent reactions (66). As Frankenstein’s monster gathered more knowledge through his observations, he felt more disturbed and unhappy with his situation, and these emotions bloomed into rage and aggression towards the world at large.

As Frankenstein’s monster begins to accept the harsh treatment inflicted upon him, he experiences agony and turns to aggression, thus satisfying two more of the criteria on the Complex Trauma Screener. When speaking to Victor, the monster stated that his reflections on himself and his experiences led to indescribable “agony” that “only increased with knowledge” (80). He often found himself “wretched, helpless, and alone,” thus making the creature feel that attaining happiness was impossible. Likening himself to Satan, Frankenstein’s monster felt bitter and envious of those who experienced “bliss” and companionship (104). This comparison to Satan, an inhuman entity, highlights the monster’s sense of detachment from the rest of society and humanity. Through this alienation, the creature begins to feel immense rage towards the world. After being met once again with shock, fear, and unacceptance after approaching the cottagers, the monster was angered. He expressed his feelings to Victor, stating that he “could with pleasure have destroyed the cottage and its inhabitants, and have glutted [himself] with their shrieks and misery” (120). His experience had awakened a “wild beast” that wanted to destroy “the objects that obstructed [him]” (121). The monster focused his negative emotions towards Victor, determined to exact his revenge after all that he had endured. As he journeyed through the forests, the creature encountered a little boy. Upon realizing that the boy, William, was related to Victor Frankenstein, the monster strangled him until William “lay dead at [his] feet” (138). These aggressive actions continue throughout the novel, where the monster kills Elizabeth, Victor’s newlywed wife (121). Her murder eventually leads to Victor’s demise as he attempts to seek vengeance by chasing his creation across icy terrain (179).

By measuring Frankenstein’s monster and his actions against the Complex Trauma Screener, it is evident that he suffers from Complex PTSD as a result of trauma inflicted by his creator as well as society. The creature exemplifies all 7 of the major symptoms on the screener. From Victor’s abandonment to the villagers

ostracizing him, the creature's life experiences cause him to hold strong memories and have vivid nightmares. These events also incite strong feelings of loneliness and worthlessness. In addition, the monster becomes fearful of others' reactions to his appearance and chooses to avoid all populated places and observe people from afar. Near the end of the novel, the constant rejection the monster endured gives rise to anger and aggression, leading to numerous deaths. Thus, as a result of various instances of ostracization by his creator and society at large, Frankenstein's monster developed all 7 of the major symptoms of Complex PTSD.

The importance of this research extends beyond classic literature, as it can help society understand the complexities of trauma. Complex PTSD is a budding topic of research in modern psychology, and much remains to be explored. While the diagnosis is new, one of the main causes of the disorder is child abuse, which has been a pervasive societal issue throughout history. Across various racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, many have been subject to adverse childhood experiences, making this topic of research pertinent in today's world. The recent development of the Complex Trauma Screener aids in the growth of this field, potentially working towards better understanding and minimizing the negative psychological impacts of early traumatic events. The versatility of this screener is demonstrated through its ability to be applied to literary characters, such as Frankenstein's monster, alongside populations in the context of the real world.

As Frankenstein's monster exemplifies all of the seven major symptoms of Complex PTSD, his character can be used as a tool to help society better understand and empathize with people suffering from the disorder. For centuries, literature has been used to communicate the plights of others. Within the novel *Frankenstein* itself, the creature is able to learn and experience human emotions by reading books such as *Paradise Lost* (104). In a similar vein, Frankenstein's monster has been used in the past to better comprehend the challenges and experiences of those with trauma. In a thesis by Wendy Fidler, the creature's journey is compared to that of a military veteran, as both feel shunned by society as they attempt to integrate into it (Fidler 7). However, it may be more intuitive to draw parallels between Frankenstein's monster and an abused child, as the monster's life experiences encapsulate the trauma that results from neglectful parenting. With this in mind, it seems that certain populations, with higher incidences of adverse childhood experiences, would benefit from this avenue of research. For example,

a study conducted by Claudia Catani and Iris Sossalla at Bielefeld University unveils that children with intellectual disabilities are disproportionately vulnerable to experiencing traumatic events due to their outward appearance (Catani and Sossalla 7). As the monster faced similar prejudices, these kinds of populations may resonate with his life experiences. With child abuse being a prominent issue in today's society, the use of Frankenstein's monster as a model for Complex PTSD has the potential to help victims and medical professionals alike in addressing the psychological impact of it.

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