

Excerpts from *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*

Mary Shelley

Victor Frankenstein is successful at creating a monster. Disgusted by what he's created, he flees his laboratory and the monster escapes. The monster ends up living in the forest and observing a family he calls "cottagers." In this section of the novel, the monster shares his story with his creator, Dr. Frankenstein. As the monster observes the family, he notices how sad the family has become and how very little food they have. A woman from another land arrives and becomes part of the family. She does not speak the language and begins to take lessons.

From Chapter 13:

"I now hasten to the more moving part of my story. I shall relate events that impressed me with feelings which, from what I had been, have made me what I am. (1)

"Presently I found that [the stranger] was endeavoring to learn their language; and the idea instantly occurred to me that I should make use of the same instructions to the same end. I improved rapidly in the knowledge of language, so that in two months I began to comprehend most of the words uttered by my protectors. My days were spent in close attention, that I might more speedily master the language. While I improved in speech, I also learned the science of letters as it was taught to the stranger, and this opened before me a wide field for wonder and delight. (2)

"The book from which Felix instructed Safie was Volney's *Ruins of Empires*. I should not have understood the purpose of this book had not Felix, in reading it, given very minute explanations. Through this work I obtained a cursory knowledge of history and a view of the several empires at present existing in the world; it gave me an insight into the manners, governments, and religions of the different nations of the earth. I heard of the slothful Asiatics, of the stupendous genius and mental activity of the Grecians, of the wars and wonderful virtue of the early Romans, of the decline of that mighty empire, of chivalry, Christianity, and kings. I heard of the discovery of the American hemisphere and wept over the hapless fate of its original inhabitants. (3)

“These wonderful narrations inspired me with strange feelings. Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous¹ and magnificent, yet so vicious and base²? He appeared at one time a mere scion of the evil principle and at another as all that can be conceived of noble and godlike. To be a great and virtuous man appeared the highest honor that can befall a sensitive being; to be base and vicious, as many on record have been, appeared the lowest degradation. For a long time I could not conceive how one man could go forth to murder his fellow, or even why there were laws and governments; but when I heard details of vice and bloodshed, my wonder ceased and I turned away with disgust and loathing. (4)

“Every conversation of the cottagers now opened new wonders to me. The strange system of human society was explained to me. I heard of the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty, of rank, descent, and noble blood. (5)

“The words induced me to turn towards myself. I learned that the possessions most esteemed by your fellow creatures were high and unsullied background united with riches. A man might be respected with only one of these advantages, but without either he was considered, except in very rare instances, as a vagabond and a slave, doomed to waste his powers for the profits of the chosen few! And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant, but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was, besides, endued with³ a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they and could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded theirs. When I looked around I saw and heard of none like me. Was I, then, a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled and whom all men disowned? (6)

“I cannot describe to you the agony that these reflections inflicted upon me; I tried to dispel them, but sorrow only increased with knowledge. Oh, that I had forever remained in my native wood, nor known nor felt beyond the sensations of hunger, thirst, and heat! (7)

¹ virtuous: noble with high moral principles

² base: without moral principles, not noble

³ endued with: given

“Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind when it has once seized on it like a lichen on the rock.⁴ I wished sometimes to shake off all thought and feeling, but I learned that there was but one means to overcome the sensation of pain, and that was death—a state which I feared yet did not understand. I admired virtue and good feelings and loved the gentle manners and amiable qualities of my cottagers, but I was shut out from interactions with them, except through means which I obtained by stealth, and which rather increased the desire I had of becoming one among my fellows. (8)

“Other lessons were impressed upon me even more deeply. I heard of the difference of sexes, and the birth and growth of children, how the father doted on the smiles of the infant, and the lively remarks of the older child, how all the life and cares of the mother were wrapped up in the precious charge,⁵ how the mind of youth expanded and gained knowledge, of brother, sister, and all the various relationships which bind one human being to another in mutual bonds. (9)

“But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses; or if they had, all my past life was now a blot, a blind vacancy in which I distinguished nothing. From my earliest remembrance I had been as I then was in height and proportion. I had never yet seen a being resembling me or who claimed any interaction with me. What was I? The question again recurred, to be answered only with groans. (10)

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⁴ lichen on the rock: a slow-growing plant which grows like a crust on rocks; it is hard to remove or separate from the rocks

⁵ the precious charge: taking care of children