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Escaping to the Sickbed: Illness in *Frankenstein*

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“Escaping to the Sickbed: Illness in *Frankenstein*”

Illness tends to lead to separation from society. Becoming sick has always been a reason for someone to stay home to avoid spreading the disease to other people, and because continuing to work rather than resting may cause the one's condition to get worse or, at the very least, take more time to improve. Throughout Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*, the main character falls sick very often, regularly separating himself from society. His deteriorating physical state appears to be linked to the monster he creates, as he usually succumbs to illness immediately after a traumatizing confrontation with it. The character of Victor Frankenstein subconsciously uses sickness as an escape from his responsibilities and his guilt, both a result of his creation.

Victor Frankenstein has the convenient tendency to become ill whenever he feels guilt and has a responsibility to do something. Immediately after creating the monster and realizing how terrifying it is, Frankenstein flees, proving that he is loath to take any type of responsibility for what he had done. After seeing Clerval, he returns to his apartment and, upon seeing that the monster has left, becomes very joyful, eventually laughing in a way that disturbs his friend and leads to him becoming sick (Shelley 37). At this point, Frankenstein believes that he has unleashed something terrible. His hysteria about the creature and its absence leads to a serious illness that will consume him for months. During this time, he is able to stay in his apartment with Clerval, having a perfect excuse to not pursue his creation. Much later, the monster takes the life of Clerval and this sends Frankenstein into another bout of sickness. He is taken to see Clerval's body and his guilty conscience shows when he sees it, as he exclaims, “Have my

murderous machinations deprived you also, my dearest Henry, of life? Two I have already destroyed; other victims await their destiny” (122). Overcome by guilt, a physical response follows, as Frankenstein explains, “The human frame could no longer support the agonizing suffering that I had endured, and I was carried out of the room in strong convulsions. A fever succeeded this” (122). He feels guilty but, still fearing action, returns to his safe place: sickness. In both instances, Frankenstein becomes ill as a result of extreme guilt and manages to escape actually doing anything about the thing that he feels guilty about as a result.

After creating the monster, Frankenstein is completely alone for the rest of the story. He always has other people around him, but no one else knows about the creature and this secret consumes him. Illness offers an escape from this as well. When he becomes sick for the first time, he sees the creation, stating, “I thought I saw the spectre glide into the room; *he* can tell.— Oh, save me! Save me!’ I imagined the monster had seized me; I struggled furiously, and fell down in a fit” (37). Forced into silence and mimicking normality when healthy, Frankenstein is able to talk about his guilt when he is sick. After Clerval’s death, he does the same thing, recalling, “My ravings, as I afterwards heard, were frightful; I called myself the murderer of William, of Justine, and of Clerval” (122). Again, illness offers an escape from the maddening secrecy, allowing him to expel his guilt by confessing his crimes (or what he believes to be his crimes) without facing the consequences that such a confession would usually bring.

Illness also brings about the end of the story, as it eventually takes Frankenstein’s life. He falls ill after losing the monster in the ice, feeling guilty about all the lives his creation has taken and about the fact that he has not been able to stop it. Here, his illness again gives him an excuse to rest instead of following the monster and allows him to talk to Walton about the problem, again expelling some of the guilt. This instance of sickness, however, is different from the others

because of the obvious fact that Frankenstein does not eventually recover, but dies instead. For him, death is the ultimate escape, allowing him to finally stop fighting the battle that always brought him nothing but misery and that he did everything he could to avoid fighting. The fact that he found this escape on the boat with Walton is no coincidence, however. In all previous instances of sickness, he has obligations to eventually rejoin society after escaping for a while; he has family and friends that worry for him and he needs to stop the monster. By the end of the story, however, he has no family or friends left and manages to pass his obligation for killing the creature on to someone else. He asks Walton to take this task from him, and then dies soon after (151-152). After losing this responsibility, he has no reason to continue fighting or living and therefore can move on to the next level of his escapism: death.

Victor Frankenstein is consumed by guilt almost constantly as the book progresses. Whenever something causes him to become exceptionally guilty, he becomes ill. The illness allows him to temporarily escape from any responsibility he has and also to talk about his guilt, soothing his conscience. He always regains his health, of course, because he has obligations to the people around him to appear normal and also to himself to stop the monster. Eventually, however, these obligations both end and he escapes into illness and never comes back, dying on Walton's boat.