

Wounds to be Trusted

The Role of Friendship in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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Friendship is one of the major themes in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In fact, Robert Kiely claims that the two dominant themes of *Frankenstein* are “the absolute need for friendship, versus the right of the genius to work in solitude” (Schug 607). Although this may be an overstatement, friendship is clearly central to the novel. Jessica Hale notes that the “most intimate and intense relationships in the novel occur not between husbands and wives, but between ... friends” (Hale 13). In fact, throughout most of the novel, all the men are either widowers or bachelors, and show little interest in pursuing romance. Friendship, however, is valued highly by all the major characters. Why is friendship so important within *Frankenstein*?

The answer is simple, but striking. Explicitly and implicitly, the novel consistently presents intimate friendship as a means of salvation. Friendship rescues, restores, renews, and redeems. Victor, Elizabeth, Walton, and Beaufort, are all saved by friendships at least once. It is not God, not romantic passion, not Truth, not heroics, but deep, intimate friendship that saves, or has the potential to save the characters.

Repeatedly, friendship provides salvation from depression and emotional afflictions. When Victor is depressed and unsociable, he says that it was his best friend Clerval who “called forth the better feelings of my heart; he again taught me to love the aspect of nature, and the cheerful faces of children. Excellent friend!” (97). Likewise, when Victor is later in London, and the deaths of William and Justine have “filled [his] soul with anguish” (183), he says that “the voice of Henry soothed me, and I could thus cheat myself into a transitory peace” (183). His intimate friendship with Clerval was all that encouraged him or brought him any measure of happiness. Elizabeth is also saved by friendship; she becomes an emotional wreck after William's death, and Alphonse writes that Victor “alone can console Elizabeth” (99), begging Victor to return to Geneva and restore his friend. Victor's return does restore Elizabeth's spirit, and “fills [her] with hope” (107). Yet perhaps it is the creature who most clearly expresses his belief in friendship as a means of salvation. He claims that “I am malicious because I am miserable” (169), and that he is miserable because he is alone and rejected by all. Thus, he acknowledges that he has become evil, and sees companionship as his only hope for salvation. Should he find a companion, he says that his “evil passions will have fled, for [he] shall meet with sympathy” (171). However, his companion is never animated. Having no friend, the creature continues to murder, eventually planning to kill himself. With no friendship at all, the creature is evil. The other main characters all have friends, and it is these friendships that save them from the emotional afflictions that drove the creature into malignancy.

Friendship does not merely save people from emotional tribulation, but actually saves Victor physically several times. After creating the creature, Victor falls into a nervous fever for several months, and “during all that time Henry was [his] only nurse” (89). Victor's disorder rendered him “lifeless” (89), and he says that “surely nothing but the unbounded and unremitting attentions of my friend could have restored me to life” (89). It is his friendship with Clerval that literally saves his life. Later, when “a real insanity” (213) possesses him, he says that “Elizabeth alone had the power to draw me from these fits” (213). His father is with him, but the paternal relationship isn't enough to physically restore him; as Clerval is dead by this point, Elizabeth is his only remaining friend, and it is only friendship that has the power to halt his madness. Friendship seems to create a strong physical bond between Victor and Clerval; “when Clerval dies, Frankenstein ... falls almost mortally ill – as though he himself has been the victim” (Levine 20).

This bond between friends continues even after the friend has died. In an apostrophe, Victor says to the dead Clerval, “Even now it delights me to record your words, and to dwell on the praise of which you are so eminently deserving ... Your form so divinely wrought ... has decayed, but your spirit still visits and consoles your unhappy friend” (181-182). This bond with his dead friends gives Victor strength and encouragement to carry on. He says, “wherever I am, the soothing voice of my Elizabeth, and the conversation of Clerval, will be ever whispered in my ear. They are dead; and but one feeling in such a solitude can persuade me to preserve my life” (234). Only one feeling – true friendship – can persuade Victor to carry on, and his friends inspire him this way even though they are dead.

The novel goes one step further. At the beginning, Alphonse tries to visit and save his true friend Beaufort, who has fallen into “unfortunate circumstances” (63), along with “misery and despair” (64). Unfortunately, as “Beaufort had taken effectual measures to conceal himself ... it was ten months before [Alphonse] discovered his abode” (63), and he dies just before Alphonse arrives. Although Alphonse ends up saving and eventually marrying Beaufort's daughter, he was unable to save Beaufort, who was not willing to humble himself and trust in their “truest friendship” (63). In this, the novel implies that friendship could have saved Beaufort, had he called on Alphonse. In the same way, *Frankenstein* implies that Victor could have been saved had he trusted in friendship. That is, friendship could have saved Victor from the storm of misery and destruction caused by his creation. It was while he was alone that Victor created the creature, and Victor actively “resolved to remain silent” (104). When Clerval visits him and observes his odd behavior, Victor says Clerval “was surprised, but he never attempted to draw my secret from me [and] I could never persuade myself to confide to him that

event which was so often present to my recollection, but which I feared the detail to another would only impress more deeply” (95). He “feared still more that Henry should see” (88) the creature, and this fear prevents him from seeking salvation in their friendship. However, in every other instance, Clerval has always “sincerely sympathized” (97) with Victor, easing and not adding to Victor's grief. Clerval repeatedly saves Victor emotionally and physically from the symptoms of his torment, but he is also in the best position to save Victor from his biggest problem – himself. This occurs because “Clerval is, surely, Frankenstein without the monster,” (Levine 19) a fact even acknowledged by Victor, who says “In Clerval I saw the image of my former self” (183). Thus, for Victor to recover emotionally, he needs to become like Clerval. By trusting Clerval with his secret, he would create the bridge that Clerval needs to bring Victor back across the chasm that his creature has caused to develop between Victor and Clerval. Practically, there would then be two men to hunt down the creature, rather than one; there would be two men to guard Elizabeth, and so on. Whatever Victor's feelings may be, if Clerval's friendship was truly “of that devoted and wondrous nature that the worldly-minded teach us to look for only in the imagination” (181), then surely if Victor had confided in him, Clerval would not have abandoned Victor, but would have done whatever it takes to save Victor from his past mistakes.

Nevertheless, Victor entreats Clerval to “not interfere [and] leave me to peace and solitude” (187), before he leaves to the Orkneys to create the companion. It is only when he finds Clerval dead that he realizes the great mistake he has made in not trusting his friend. After this point, he tries to confide in his father, and explain why he is depressed; his father only replies, “are you mad? My dear son, I entreat you never to make such an assertion again” (208). His father is incapable of believing him, causing Victor to cry, “Alas! My father ... how little do you know me” (208). Again, this demonstrates that the paternal relationship is not enough to save Victor in this case, but it can be easily assumed that both Clerval and Elizabeth do know Victor well enough to believe him. Thus, Victor plans to tell Elizabeth. In a letter, he tells her that he has a dreadful secret which he will tell her “the day after our marriage shall take place” (212). In the letter, he never expresses the slightest doubt that Elizabeth will believe him. Unfortunately, Elizabeth is killed before he is able to tell her. However, if he had told her earlier, it is reasonable to assume she would have been more prepared to defend herself on the night of their wedding when she was eventually killed. Perhaps she might have even had the sense to realize what the creature's intentions really were when he said “I will be with you on your wedding night!” (211) In this way, the novel implies that Victor's failure to trust in friendship took away his one hope of saving himself and his friends.

Thus throughout *Frankenstein*, friendship is portrayed as an absolute need, and it is through friendships that Victor, Elizabeth, and Walton are saved from all kinds of troubles. Moreover, Walton actually describes his initial lack of friendship as “a most severe evil” (52-53), echoing the creature's claim that a lack of friendship isn't just undesirable, but actually causes evil. When solitude and alienation become evil, friends become saviors, and friendship becomes salvation.

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