

The Self-Created Self: A Marxist Critique of Creature Self-Creation in Frankenstein

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The base-superstructure model of Marxist criticism is a structure which is socially-constructed and, therefore, actively and historically changing. Marxist critical theory and structuralism would say that social structures construct social beings and are constructed by social beings. These constructions are dialectical and interpretive, fluid and oblique. In this way, the base-superstructure model is a model of Marxist cultural theory. The material base represented in the model determines culture as the process of production of meaning and ideas physically expressed through language speech. Social discourse, expressed as language, is the means by which the ideology of the superstructure constructs the social world: "A definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world" (Williams 21). Active social language determines socialization and individuation and, as communicative products, establishes signs as "living evidence of a continuing social process" (37). In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the creature uses language as the means of evolving from a material or base being to a conscious being grounded in the ideology of the superstructure.

A central idea in Marxist criticism is that the changing mode of material production or basic economic organization of society determines the evolving history of humanity (Abrams 218). The *infrastructure* or *base* of the superstructure model consists of the economic or material elements of society. This base represents the means of production by which social beings act to produce in relationship to product. Marxist theory is "above all a materialism. All that exists...necessarily possesses a material existence" (Montag 305). Materialism then, represents any action which produces product including, and for purposes of my argument, the product of language as the material means of production.

From the infrastructure, the superstructure emerges as the ideology of social meaning and perception which represents *lived experience* to the social being. Social being determines the consciousness of individuals; ideological thought is the product of social and economic existence (Seldon 71). Consciousness then, is the product of social and economic organization. The socio-economic relations of the base give rise to the socio-cultural relations of the superstructure. Culture is "inseparable from the

historical conditions in which human beings create their material lives" (71). Movement upward from the material act at the base toward the pre-understanding of the common framework of ideology represents stages of development of productive forces.

Consciousness of material being is based in the infrastructure, and the physical act of expression, language, is the means of production. The action of performing or understanding a speech act establishes the relations of production as the forms of social discourse necessary for constitutive ideology in the superstructure. Produced by the physical body, language itself is an integral element of human *self-creation*; it is a "distinctly human opening of and opening to the world: not a distinguishable or instrumental but a constitutive faculty" (Williams 24). Language has the power to establish identity as being. It makes or creates the self. Self is self-created within a social and cultural ideology: "man as a being...creates himself and the conditions of his life...It is man's nature to be constantly developing, in co-operation with other men, himself and the world about him" (McLellan 121). As self evolves, social ideology evolves; language transmits patterns of interpretation through the speech act and perception of meaning with its active and dynamic experience of interpreting reality.

The creature, in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, begins to interpret reality from the basic elemental stage of the material body. Without the means of expressing and of understanding self, he exists as a *natural* being. Physical reality is perceived through the physical senses; "the original era of [his] being" is a time when he "saw, felt, heard, and smelt" without the ability to "distinguish between the operations of [his] various senses" (Shelley 92). He knows nothing beyond the material sensations of the natural body. The base of his existence is literally material existence, placing him symbolically within the base of Marx's cultural model.

The preliminary stage in the evolution of the history of the creature occurs at the point of consciousness as being. When physical need is met, the being begins to look for something beyond the natural. Awareness of self as body evolves into self-awareness as being. From self-awareness stems the need to communicate with other beings. The Marxist idea of the relationship of part to the whole dictates that the self cannot be interpreted without interaction with the social whole. Eagleton restates this concept as *objects*

"inextricably bound up with a larger whole, and...also related to a thinking mind which is itself part of a historical situation" (Seldon 95). Communicative and social need is manifest in language and social discourse.

The pre-language creature experiences language first as the act of creating language. He observes the speech act as "sounds that [are] monotonous, and neither resembling the harmony of the...instrument nor the songs of the birds" (Shelley 98). At this point, the act of language is still grounded in the natural world. The physical act of speech as the means of production of language cannot, yet, be understood as product. Interpreting the act of speech as a method of communication does not occur immediately, however. Some understanding of meaning must evolve before interpretation can take place.

The next preparatory stage in the creature's evolution as being develops with his discovery of the relations of speech as production for social discourse. He begins to interpret, by observing the De Lacey family, the sounds of speech as "a method of communicating...experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds" (99). He perceives the power of language in expressing and interpreting emotion; to him, it is "a godlike science" (100). The material world is expanding, opening, with the changes language enacts in reality as a mode of production. The relations of production as language is expressed as the distribution of language power. At this point in the creature's history, language power is non-existent. His awareness of its power, however, causes him to "ardently desire to become acquainted with it" (100). This awareness prepares the way for ascending the base-superstructure model by means of language.

The first perceivable step out of the material base necessitates the creature's capacity of language and knowledge be adequate for referential purposes. He discovers the meaning and application of words; he delights in learning "the ideas appropriate to...sounds" (100). Through observation, the creature builds a referential vocabulary of cultural content. The speech act evolves into action with meaning.

Observation of the speech act as having meaning leads to an understanding of the act of reading as an extension of the speech act. Reading, as interpretation of speech signs, becomes possible for the creature with his understanding that "the sounds for which they

[stand] as signs" (101) represent a larger context of meaning. The *science* of signs and the *science* of speech combine, in the monster's mind, to become the vehicle by which he enters the social world and creates himself as a social being. He longs to "discover [himself] to the cottagers", but not until he "first [becomes] master of their language" (101). He believes that language will raise him above the material world of the body; he hopes that knowledge, gained through language, "might enable [him] to make them overlook the deformity of [his] figure" (101). The dialectical nature of language as contradiction comes into play when language, as means of production, becomes the product of his endeavors, and the vehicle of ideology that creates a presupposed social reality.

The history of the creature, to this point, involves a level of observation and reflection about language power, but demonstrates no activity with regard to language use. He has reached a moderate degree of interpretive thought through observing the social relations of his neighbours. The introduction of a stranger into the De Lacey social equation, an alien presence, is the catalyst which develops the abstract idea of language into a concrete application of language as ideology. The informal method of acquiring knowledge and language previously employed by the creature is replaced by the formal teaching method (once removed) which Felix utilizes to socialize and individuate the alien, Safie, into the social relationship of the group. Both beings improve "rapidly in the knowledge of language" (104). The formal training enables the creature to learn "the science of letters", opening for him "a wide field for wonder and delight" (105). Socialization, through language, proceeds, at a great rate, toward acceptance of Safie into a society of social beings. The creature, regardless of the speed and ease with which he learns language, remains isolated outside the boundaries of the social circle. {To impose a Marxist critique at this point requires a *giant* leap of faith over a large gap in the text, namely that the creature cannot develop language-use isolated from a social group. Language is socially-constructed and produced; Marx postulated that "production by isolated individuals outside society...is as great an absurdity as...the development of language without individuals living together and talking to one another" (McLellan 70).} This isolation is not a hindrance, however, in the formalized learning of the mechanics of language and the analysis of texts

as culturally-established ideology of meaning and interpretation.

The development of identity at this point in the history of the creature is self-created in the mind: a consciousness built on the observation of language as material act and the internal active struggle for new consciousness through understanding language as ideology "that is the ineradicable emphasis of the Marxist sense of self-creation" (Williams 212). Through formal texts, the creature acquires knowledge of history, "manners, government, and religion" as well as the decline of empires, "of chivalry, Christianity, and kings" (Shelley 105), each an example of an ideological belief system based in the superstructure model of Marxist criticism.

As the creature gains knowledge of ideology, his consciousness of self is raised; he questions his identity. He looks for a place in the world as a social being; he asks "And what [am] I?...[Am] I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men [flee], and whom all men [disown]?" (106). As knowledge increases, so understanding increases of the isolation and alienation he feels as a non-social being, as a non-being. Understanding of the cultural and social bonds, "all the various relationships which bind one human being to another in mutual bonds" (106), avails him nothing without acceptance into the social group. This knowledge causes inner turmoil and struggle, and ultimately leads to his decision to introduce himself into the social group of the De Lacey family.

A significant leap forward in the development of the creature as being occurs with the first social act of speech and the application of language to express meaning in a social relationship. It is interesting, and perhaps significant, that the first speech act of the creature is utilized to deceive; he identifies himself as "a traveller in want of a little rest" (115) when, in reality, he travels only a few steps. Cultural ideology could connote the distance of a few literal steps as great distance in symbolic meaning, for language as ideology is always interpretive, always fluid and oblique. What constitutes meaning is always only interpreted within a social framework.

The creature employs the act of speech, the language as means of production in the material base of the infrastructure, to deceive in an attempt to *undecieve* the cultural perception, based in the superstructure, of his physical body as "detestable monster" (116); he uses language as ideology to *make sense* of the world. When

communicative action fails to achieve social individuation and integration, when language is rejected, the creature is left with the knowledge gained through language, but with very little else. Without the reciprocal obligation, the give and take, of social discourse, the production of meanings and ideas inherent in cultural ideology would cease to exist. The process of reaching understanding always occurs within a "culturally ingrained preunderstanding" (Seidman 154).

The highest level of the creature's evolutionary process is deeply embedded in the ideology of the superstructure model. With the failure of communicative action, the creature has one option open with which to express his identity as a social being; language as *narrative and interpretation*. According to Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson, "reality presents itself to the human mind only in the form of stories" (Seldon 97). The creature attempts to establish reality through the use of language in narrative form when he "narrates his peaceful life among the cottagers" (Shelley 124) to Dr. Frankenstein. The narrative then, becomes the formalized representation which shapes the individual's picture of interpreted reality. The ideology, self-creation through language expressed in narrative, becomes the *myth* of existence re-created through language. It is a re-creation of ideology's concept of reality. Ultimately, it is the re-creation of the creature's self-creation.

Through the evolutionary stages of growth and development of the creature into a conscious being, language plays an integral and dominant role. The creature is elevated from the material, natural existence of the infrastructure to the ideological existence of the superstructure through language as means of production. Language, as ideology expressed and understood as culturally-constructed product, facilitates the connection of beings in a social environment. Herein lies the great irony of the creature's existence. Self-created through language, the creature has the abilities and knowledge to interact as a social being, but he will forever be isolated from society. He is unable to overcome ideological perceptions of his material form as monstrous. He cannot *undeceive* perceived reality without the reciprocal obligation on the part of society to accept his *undeceiving*. Meaning and ideas change only within a shared cultural history. Language creates an opening to the world of ideas, but the world emphatically rejects the creature as a social being. Forever isolated and alienated, he is doomed to

non-being. In the final analysis, Marxist criticism reveals the inherent paradox of the creature as self-being and social-being, for identity is always only interpreted.

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