

The Isolated Learner: Relational Absence and Humanistic Education in *Frankenstein*

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Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is most commonly read as a tale of scientific transgression, yet the creature's trajectory reveals a profound educational dimension. This paper applies Carl Rogers' humanistic education theory to reexamine the creature as a learner whose development unfolds in the absence of relational support. Although he acquires language, moral awareness, and reflective capacity, his learning fails to achieve psychological integration. Drawing on Rogers' three facilitative conditions, this study argues that the creature's tragedy stems not from cognitive deficiency, but from the sustained absence of empathy, recognition, and unconditional positive regard. *Frankenstein* thus anticipates a central insight of humanistic education: Knowledge divorced from relational response may deepen alienation rather than foster wholeness.

Keywords: *Frankenstein*, humanistic education, Carl Rogers, relational absence, learner development

Introduction

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the creature is most often read as a figure of monstrosity, scientific transgression, or moral excess. Such readings are indispensable, yet they tend to foreground the dangers of creation while paying comparatively little attention to the creature's developmental experience after creation. A closer reading reveals that the creature is not merely an object of horror, but a being who undergoes a sustained process of learning. He acquires language, develops emotional awareness, engages with literary and historical texts, and gradually forms a reflective understanding of himself in relation to others. In this sense, he may be understood not simply as a created being, but as a learner in the process of self-formation.

This perspective raises a different question from the one most commonly asked of the novel. Rather than asking only why the creature becomes violent, this study asks under what relational conditions his learning unfolds, and why that learning fails to result in wholeness. The issue, then, is not whether the creature learns, but whether his learning is supported by the kind of relational response through which a self can be formed, affirmed, and sustained.

This paper does not attempt to explain the entirety of *Frankenstein* through a single educational framework. Instead, it focuses on one crucial dimension of the novel: the consequences of relational absence for a developing learner. Drawing on Carl Rogers' humanistic education theory, this study argues that the creature's tragedy can be understood, in part, as an educational failure. His considerable intellectual and emotional development unfolds without the guidance, recognition, or affective support of a responsive human presence. As a result, his learning

leads not to integration, but to deepening alienation. Reconsidered in this light, *Frankenstein* emerges not only as a cautionary tale about creation, but also as a profound reflection on what happens when a learner is left to develop without an educator.

Theoretical Framework: Humanistic Education and Relational Conditions

Humanistic education, as articulated by Carl Rogers, shifts the meaning of learning away from the mere acquisition of knowledge and toward the development of the whole person. He argues that “students have an inherent potential to grow and develop provided they are placed in a supportive and empathetic environment” (Patrick & Nordin, 2025, p. 1). Rather than treating education as the transmission of information, Rogers views learning as a process of becoming—one in which cognitive growth is inseparable from emotional experience, self-perception, and human relationship. Development, from this perspective, depends not only on what a learner comes to know, but also on whether that learning is sustained by conditions that make self-formation possible.

At the center of Carl Rogers’ theory are three relational conditions that facilitate growth: congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard—what he emphasizes as the “necessary and sufficient conditions” for constructive personality change and psychological development (Rogers, 2007, p. 240). Congruence refers to the authenticity of the facilitating figure, whose responses are internally consistent rather than distant or defensive. Empathy involves understanding the learner’s inner world from within, through responsive presence rather than external judgment. Unconditional positive regard “is an experience of accepting and prizing another person” without reducing that value to performance, appearance, or conformity to expectation (Purswell, 2019, p. 359). Together, these conditions create a facilitative environment in which emerging experience can be explored, affirmed, and integrated into a coherent sense of self.

When these conditions are absent, development may proceed cognitively while remaining fractured at the personal level. A learner may acquire language, concepts, and moral awareness, yet be unable to integrate such learning into a stable self. Knowledge without recognition, in this sense, may intensify alienation rather than overcome it. In *Frankenstein*, the absolute deprivation of these conditions illuminates why the creature, despite his remarkable intellectual development, ultimately fails to achieve psychological integration. Victor’s role as creator is functionally analogous to that of an educator: Just as an educator bears ongoing responsibility for a learner’s formation, Victor’s withdrawal constitutes not merely an ethical failure, but a relational void that disrupts the very conditions necessary for becoming.

Victor’s Withdrawal and the Absence of a Responsive Educator

A humanistic reading of *Frankenstein* invites a reconsideration of the creature not simply as a monstrous figure, but as a developing subject whose trajectory reflects the consequences of learning in the absence of relational support. This section focuses on how the withdrawal of a responsive figure—functionally analogous to an educator—shapes the creature’s development. The argument is not that Victor Frankenstein is literally a teacher, but that, as the being who brings the creature into existence and becomes its first potential source of recognition, he occupies a relational position that carries profound implications for the creature’s formation as a self.

Victor’s role in this process is critical. As the creator, he is uniquely positioned to provide initial recognition and guidance. However, his response is characterized by immediate withdrawal. Upon animating the creature, he reacts with horror: “Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room and continued

a long time traversing my bed-chamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep” (Shelley, 1818, p. 59). He subsequently abandons the creature without explanation or support. This act constitutes not only an ethical failure, but the removal of the only figure who could have mediated the creature’s early development. As A. Rogers notes, authentic engagement requires a guide to meet the other “compassionately in her distress, as a fellow human being” (Rogers, 2014, p. 34). Victor entirely fails to provide this presence, perceiving the creature not as a subject requiring recognition, but as an object that has failed to meet expectations.

The creature himself articulates this deprivation with striking clarity: “But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses” (Shelley, 1818, p. 142). He recognizes that, unlike Adam who is “guarded by the especial care of his Creator”, he is left “wretched, helpless, and alone” (Shelley, 1818, p. 154). Victor’s refusal to remain present effectively eliminates the possibility of any formative relational engagement at a crucial developmental stage, constituting in Rogerian terms not merely a pedagogical gap, but a relational void.

The Creature’s Development and the Failure of Integration

According to person-centered theory, human beings are born “with an innate motivational drive, the actualizing tendency”, which Rogers defines as “the inherent tendency of the organism to develop all its capacities” (Patterson & Joseph, 2007, p. 119). From the outset, the creature demonstrates a remarkable capacity for learning. His initial orientation toward others is marked by curiosity and benevolence: He gathers food from the woods rather than depleting the De Lacey family’s resources, and even “brought home firing sufficient for the consumption of several days” (Shelley, 1818, p. 129). Through sustained observation, he acquires language, moving from isolated sounds to structured communication, and grasps not merely linguistic forms but their social and emotional significance. His engagement with *Paradise Lost*, *Plutarch’s Lives*, and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* further reveals a developing moral imagination, as he reflects on justice, virtue, and belonging in an attempt to situate himself within the human moral order (Shelley, 1818, p. 151). His development thus aligns with the actualizing tendency—a movement toward understanding, coherence, and relational connection.

Yet the consequences of relational absence accumulate over time. The creature gradually recognizes that “I was, besides, endued with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man” (Shelley, 1818, p. 141). His learning is entirely self-directed and unmediated—he has no interlocutor to confirm, challenge, or contextualize his interpretations, and no access to what Rogers would describe as a facilitative relational environment. As a result, knowledge deepens his awareness of exclusion rather than fostering integration: “Increase of knowledge only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast I was” (Shelley, 1818, p. 156). He “wished sometimes to shake off all thought and feeling” (Shelley, 1818, p. 142). These responses reveal not a failure of intelligence, but a failure of integration. Without a responsive presence to mediate his growing self-awareness, the creature’s learning becomes a source of suffering rather than formation.

This tension becomes especially evident in the De Lacey episode. The creature’s careful preparation to approach the blind father—choosing someone who cannot judge him by appearance—reveals both his desire for acceptance and his awareness of social prejudice. For a brief moment, the encounter suggests the possibility of genuine recognition. Yet the sudden return of Felix, Agatha, and Safie, and their immediate violent rejection, collapses this possibility entirely. What is lost is not merely a social interaction, but the creature’s most concrete opportunity to enter a reciprocal human relationship—and with it, the fragile coherence he has been attempting to construct through learning.

Even after repeated rejection, the creature continues to seek relational stability. He reminds Victor: “Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed” (Shelley, 1818, p. 114), and appeals for a companion, arguing that “I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous” (Shelley, 1818, p. 114). Victor’s refusal reinforces the pattern of non-recognition. Following the destruction of the female creature, the last possibility of relational connection is extinguished: “There was none among the myriads of men that existed who would pity or assist me... from that moment I declared everlasting war against the species” (Shelley, 1818, p. 163). What this declaration marks is not the emergence of innate evil, but the collapse of a self that has exhausted every available means of seeking recognition. Violence becomes, in this sense, the final response of a learner for whom all relational possibilities have been foreclosed.

The creature’s turn toward violence is thus more precisely understood not as inherent monstrosity, but as the consequence of accumulated rejection without mediation. Deprived of any relational framework through which to process his experience, his knowledge intensifies awareness of exclusion rather than facilitating growth. In humanistic terms, this reflects a failure of integration: Experience and self-concept remain in conflict, producing instability and fragmentation. The creature’s tragedy lies not in his capacity to learn, but in the conditions under which that learning unfolds—without the relational support necessary for becoming whole.

Conclusion

Frankenstein can thus be reread not only as a cautionary tale about scientific ambition, but also as a narrative that exposes the developmental consequences of relational absence. This study has not sought to reduce the novel to a single educational meaning; rather, it has focused on one revealing dimension of the creature’s tragedy: the way in which significant learning may fail to lead to wholeness when it unfolds without recognition, guidance, or affective support.

From a humanistic education perspective, the creature is not simply a being who acquires knowledge and then misuses it. He is a developing learner whose intellectual and emotional capacities emerge in the absence of a facilitative human presence. His trajectory suggests that cognitive growth alone is insufficient for the formation of an integrated self. Language, moral awareness, and reflective consciousness do not automatically generate belonging, self-acceptance, or emotional stability. When relational conditions are absent, learning may deepen self-awareness while simultaneously intensifying alienation.

Seen in this light, Victor Frankenstein’s failure is especially revealing. His withdrawal does not merely signify ethical irresponsibility; it removes the one figure most capable of providing the creature with initial recognition and response. The creature’s subsequent movement toward resentment and violence cannot be attributed to educational absence alone, yet that absence remains a crucial factor in understanding why his development becomes fractured rather than fulfilled.

What *Frankenstein* ultimately reveals is not that learning is dangerous in itself, but that learning without relationship may leave the learner profoundly alone. Humanistic education reminds us that development depends not only on what one comes to know, but on whether one is recognized, responded to, and sustained in the process of becoming. In this sense, the creature is not merely a failed creation; he is an isolated learner whose considerable development unfolds without the conditions necessary for becoming whole.

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