

Frankenstein and the Timelessness of Queer Identities

Teaching Mary Shelley's Frankenstein through Queer Theory in the

Upper-Secondary EFL classroom



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Abstract

This paper analyses the pivotal gothic novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley through a close queer reading, focusing on excerpts featuring the artificially created creature and their maker, Victor Frankenstein. The queer perspective is applied to the gender identity and expression of the creature, which is a reading that lends itself to the teaching of the novel to Swedish upper-secondary students because of the timelessness of the themes and its close ties to the 2022 recommendations of the Swedish National Agency for Education regarding sexuality, consent, and relationships. The analysis focuses on three excerpts from the novel that are particularly fitting for teaching alongside queer theory and finds that the creature can be likened to an adolescent individual trying to make sense of their gender identity and place in the world, which is an equally engaging and useful approach to take when teaching upper-secondary English students. The conclusion determines that the approach of queer theory in the reading of *Frankenstein* could prove an effective way to make a classic novel relevant and engaging to English 7 students while fulfilling both the literary reading prompts of the course and the comprehensive upper-secondary school prompts for dealing with equality, identity, and sexuality.

Keywords: *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley, queer theory, queer pedagogy, EFL

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1 INTRODUCTION

An uninitiated student's perception of Mary Shelley's 1831 novel *Frankenstein* may be limited to the notion of a green, zombie-like monster with bolts coming out of its head, with nary an intelligent thought between them. However, introducing excerpts from Mary Shelley's novel through a close reading paired with an introduction to queer theory, offers another interpretation of the creature as an adolescent coming-of-age individual desperately trying to make sense of their¹ own identity and place in the world while getting no help from their dysfunctional and absent parent. The creature's experience of a disconnect between their mind and body paired with their feelings of otherness and alienation from everyone around them can be read as gender questioning, and other characters similarly display queer experiences.

While a proposed "classical" reading of the entirety of *Frankenstein* in a Swedish upper-secondary EFL classroom runs a risk of being spoiled on account of there not being sufficient time and resources to aid the students in approaching and understanding the text fully, an applied queer perspective to three of the novel's most poignant passages would prove to fit not only the circumstances of teaching but would be a better fit for the creation of true engagement and interest in the student. The generally poor state of dealing with queer topics in Swedish schools is expressed by a report from The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society that states that young LGBTQI+ people experience that the teaching of LGBTQI+ topics in their schools is either non-existent or inadequately handled (2022).

The relevance of using *Frankenstein* as teaching material in an English 7 class with the aid of a queer perspective is not only fitting to the real-life experiences of students but also highly aligns with the corresponding Swedish National Agency for Education subject curricula

¹ They/them/their pronouns are used referring to the creature considering this paper's reading of the creature as gender non-conforming.

as well as with recently instituted general upper-secondary guidelines regarding sexuality, consent, and relationships. In addition to incorporating the reading of contemporary as well as older literature as part of the core content, the English 7 curriculum addresses the incorporation of societal, social, and political issues and ethical and existential questions in different contexts and areas where English is used in the teaching (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2021). Alongside these core content alignments, the Swedish National Agency for Education has through their new general guidelines for upper-secondary school worked to further implement such things as the awareness and deconstruction of gender norms and power structures and a critical approach to representations of sexuality and relationships (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022a). The present paper proposes a teaching of *Frankenstein* with the addition of queer theory that applies a fresh perspective to the classic novel and aspires to inspire, educate, and engage students while also fulfilling several prompts from the subject guidelines.

1.1 Aim and research questions

While there is a substantial amount of literary research on the topic of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and the application of the queer perspective to the novel belongs to a long-standing tradition of linking the gothic genre to queerness (Zigarovich, 2018), there is a much smaller amount of research that brings the novel together with queerness and pedagogy, and an even smaller, almost non-existent faction that does so in the context of a Swedish upper-secondary EFL class. Aiming to bridge that gap in the research, the purpose of this paper is to conduct a queer close reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, applying its relevance specifically to the English 7 upper-secondary school curriculum together with recent non-subject discriminatory Swedish National Agency for Education guidelines regarding sexuality, consent, and relationships. The paper will be guided by the following research questions:

How is queer theory related to the Swedish National Agency for Education curricula?

In what way does *Frankenstein* portray queer identities?

How can *Frankenstein* be taught through a queer lens to English 7 students?

2 BACKGROUND

The following section provides a theoretical and research background on the topics touched upon in this paper.

2.1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this paper consists of a presentation of queer theory and its application to literary criticism, which will be defined and used to guide the subsequent analysis.

2.1.1 Queer theory

In the words of Tyson (2015), the term queer is a reclaimed tool of homophobic oppression that now is used to signify the inclusivity of all members of the LGBTQ community, as in lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer people, and it also signifies a theoretical perspective that views self-identity as a fluid spectrum without any categories etched in stone (pp. 319–321). In the context of literary criticism, an applied queer perspective can mean any LGBTQ interpretation of a text or can serve to deconstruct the heteronormative definitions of gender and/or sexual identity that are applied by default to a text (Tyson, 2015, pp. 321–322). It is in effect, the complicated and hard-defined nuances of human identity that queer criticism seeks to explore.

In terms of the forms of textual evidence that motivate a queer reading of a text, Tyson mentions four distinct cues with homosocial bonding as the first. This textual cue displays a strong emotional bond between two characters of the same sex, that display various levels of

homoeroticism. The second cue is signs or characteristics of a gay and lesbian nature, or the stereotypically assigned LGBTQ characteristics of applying traditionally feminine traits for male characters and traditionally masculine traits for female characters (Tyson, 2015, pp. 324–326). Queries to reflect upon when reading a text written in a time when openly queer texts were not accepted are in what ways the queer, gay or lesbian experience is coded into an otherwise heterosexual work, or how a work by a heterosexual author can be reread to reveal a queer presence between the lines (Tyson, 2015, pp. 326–327).

In her revolutionary essay *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler deemed both sex and gender as social constructs with performative qualities, both contributing to the status quo of hetero- and gender normativity (1990). Butler also speaks of the notion of an unintelligible gender in opposition to the intelligible genders of “woman” and “man”, gender identities that have been established and are understood as pillars of our society. Any individual carrying out the gendered actions aligning with the cultural and social norms to which they have been assigned establishes their accepted role and those who falter in this and fall out of the mould and become unintelligible are punished (Butler, 1990).

Other aspects of queer theory relevant to this paper are the interrelated topics of personal pronoun usage and how that relates to one’s gender identity. Baron (2020) acknowledges the English personal pronouns as the feminine she/her, the masculine he/him, and the neuter pronoun it/its. The generic *he* has been of use historically in situations where a person’s gender is ambiguous or unknown, creating politically charged situations like when nineteenth-century feminists tried to invoke their voting rights by referring to the generic *he* in the voting laws (Baron, 2020, p.5). Baron further argues that a fitting generic pronoun already exists in the commonly used singular *they*. The plural pronouns *they*, *their* and *them* can be used singularly as personal pronouns to include the traditionally binary genders as well as any gender defined on or outside of the sliding scale of the gender binary, and they can also be used to refer

to those who define as non-binary or agender (2020). Baron goes on to acknowledge but dismiss the claims of ungrammaticality for the singular *they*, referring to the success of the originally plural *you* that replaced the singular *thou* during the seventeenth century (2020, p.27). The pronoun *they* along with variations of less frequent usage has been popularized to refer to non-binary, trans, genderqueer, and other gender-binary non-conforming people, and as a way refer to someone whose gender identity for some reason has not been disclosed or is yet unknown. It is every LGBTQ and cis-gendered person's right to use and be referred to by their chosen pronouns reflecting their gender identity, whatever that pronoun may be (Baron, 2020). As stated by Halberstam, gender non-conforming, agender, gender questioning and “neutrois” people are identities coined by people who oppose or wish to fall outside of the binary gender system. Still constrained by a largely heteronormative and binary society, people adhering to these forms of gender variability or defiance still experience being assigned gender embodiments in interactions with other people, often making their identities largely prospective rather than truly lived and realised (2018, pp. 9–10). The experienced emotional and bodily dissonance between someone’s gender identity and their assigned gender, which is commonly based on the external genitalia, is called gender dysphoria. It is experienced by some trans and gender non-conforming people, but not all, and is characterized by psychological distress and a desire to change one’s gender expression and physical characteristics to align with one’s gender identity. Possible ways of affirming one’s gender include changing one’s pronouns and name, taking gender-affirming hormones, and going through surgeries, but not all trans and gender non-conforming people desire all or any kind of gender affirmation practices (Turban, 2022). Having grounded this paper in queer theory, next follows a literary review that provides background on *Frankenstein* and other topics relating to this paper.

2.2 Literary review

This section presents an overview of previous research regarding the novel in focus in this paper and the literary genre it pertains to, a presentation of the English 7 subject guidelines in the Swedish curriculum, and lastly some pedagogical strategies related to teaching queer theory and sensitive issues.

2.2.1 *Frankenstein*

Several researchers conclude that *Frankenstein* is useful as teaching material in an upper-secondary school setting (Dobson and Luce-Kapler, 2005; Backes, 1994). Dobson and Luce-Kapler (2005) name the novel as ideal for adolescents due to the creature's grappling with identity and body image which are both distinct adolescent qualms, as well as there being grounds for identifying with the author being an adolescent herself at the time of writing. Backes (1994) highlights the emotional nature of Romanticism as an ideal genre of literature for engaging adolescent students, as well as stating how *Frankenstein* gives students experience with a modern myth, giving them the ability to put the story into context without making the common mistake of confusing the names of the two main characters. Furthermore, the mysticism of the novel lends itself to multiple interpretations and emotional responses, which makes it ideal as teaching material in an English classroom setting.

The queer reading of the creature and their maker Victor Frankenstein in this paper is supported by Bagocius (2022) who claims that the state of panic that the creature and Frankenstein experience is a manifestation of their heteropatriarchal queer shame, a term signifying that Frankenstein is a closeted queer man that creates a manifestation of his own queerness in the creature. Frankenstein's negative attitude towards his hidden identity is shown in his abhorrent treatment of the creature, whom he either runs from or hunts to murder throughout the novel (Bagocius, 2022). Butler (2014) corroborates the reading of the creature

as queer and describes them as representing and inhabiting a sort of liminal zone of gender, not fitting properly into the conventional binary categories. The isolation and artificial adolescence of the creature is named as the foundation of the creature's ability to provide a critical position to the compulsory assignment of every individual into categories (Butler, 2014).

2.2.2 Gothic literature

In a similar manner to the shift in meaning for the word “queer” mentioned earlier, the word “gothic” originally meant “deriving from the Middle Ages” or “barbarous”, as used by the author Horace Walpole to jokingly describe his 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto* that established the genre (Mullan, 2014a). Characteristics of the genre include supernatural elements, strange locations, periods of transition, constraint, and power (Mullan, 2014b). Defining works of the genre include *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe, *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (Mullan, 2014b). Gothic literature suspends the readers’ beliefs through mystery and their fear of the supernatural and the inexplicable to provide a simulation of the sublime (Mullan, 2014b). Establishing *Frankenstein* as a part of the historic and influential gothic literature movement, being a novel that portrays the gothic tropes of the supernatural and the imbalance of power between the characters will help students put the novel in perspective and help them gain a further understanding of the literary current from which the novel emerged.

2.2.3 The Swedish National Agency for Education

A constant in the different formulations of the subject guidelines for English 7 has been the importance of reading different kinds of literature originating from different periods and contexts (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022b). Another constant has been the parts containing formulations relating to critical theory, and arguably queer theory. In the subject

plan, those points refer to how the teaching should incorporate social, cultural, historical, and political issues as well as existential and ethical questions in different contexts and areas where English is used, relating this to the student's own knowledge and experience. The teaching should also include opportunities for the students to reflect, argue and negotiate from different perspectives, and recognize implied meanings in texts (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2021).

An inspection by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate showed that only a few schools made their comprehensive sex education subject all-encompassing and related to the core values of the school, which was found to lead to discrimination and abuse among the students. Further, the teaching regarding LGBTQ issues was shown to be insufficient (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2018). The previously mentioned inspection led to a new version of the Swedish National Agency for Education subject all-encompassing content regarding sexuality, consent, and relationships. The update has an added emphasis on consent, the importance of making your own choices, understanding the rights of yourself and others, understanding gender-related power structures, and holding a critical view on portrayals of relationships and sexuality in different mediums. The supportive materials regarding this change state how it is important that the teaching related to these subjects is adapted to the student's age, experiences, and interests and that it is performed in a safe environment (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022a).

Despite these recent changes, a 2022 report by The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society shows how there are still improvements to be made in the handling of LGBTQI issues in Swedish schools. Generally, the living conditions for young LGBTQI people remain worse than for other young people, and their school situation is named as a big contributor to this fact. Some school issues mentioned are bullying and harassment, but the affected students also blame a lack of handling of LGBTQI issues in the teaching as a detrimental factor for their situation (The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2022).

2.2.4 Teaching queer theory

According to Waite (2017), queer pedagogy is often misunderstood as being solely equated to the pedagogy of LGBTQ subjects, being teachers or students, reading and analysing LGBTQ literature (p.5). Waite proposes a perspective on queer pedagogy tied to a broader aim; a queering, questioning, and criticising of the practice of teaching, learning, and pedagogy itself, raising the idea of herself as the teacher representing a pedagogical body, namely the body of knowledge (2017, p.23). Whether bodies in the classroom are represented by the identities of students or teachers, they can be “rendered invisible” (Waite, 2017, p.34), if they concur with normativity and can be put on display as highly visible if they display queer traits. A teacher comfortable enough to acknowledge and provide their gender and/or sexual expression or identity as an example in their teaching will truly have embraced the queering of their pedagogy since it is all about blurring differences and calling every kind of domination into question (Waite, 2017, p.28).

Queer pedagogy is intrinsically based upon the values of defying heteronormativity and normalisation found in queer theory, applying these values to the educational context to make it an inclusive environment towards every student (Neto, 2018). According to Neto (2018), examples such as heteronormative family tree formations and depictions of relationship dynamics in language textbooks are examples of presenting the hypothesis of normalcy being equated with heteronormativity, which erases other identities and sexualities both in the way of not being presented as examples and in the lack of adequate language to express them. Neto (2018) goes on to emphasize that because of the way that identity and “I-statements” are fundamental in language teaching, not providing things such as gender-neutral language options or queer-coded examples leaves personally affected students unseen and erased, and not necessarily personally affected students with close-minded horizons of knowledge. A queered

pedagogy led by a sensitive and critical teacher will not only make all students feel more at ease in the learning process, but it will also help them be able to analyse and counteract exclusionary practices in other contexts, creating an intersectionally positive difference (Neto, 2018).

Zeikowitz expands on the idea of critical queer pedagogy and brings it specifically to the context of reading literature in the classroom and puts a queer perspective on medieval literature, centring on monstrous characters written by authors who did not identify as queer (2002, p. 70). The pedagogical approaches proposed are also applicable to literature published later than the Middle Ages. Zeikowitz (2002) argues that in analysing texts through a queer pedagogy, students are challenged to identify the culturally shaped norms and identities in the text and relate them to the modern-day versions that they are shaped by. Zeikowitz proposes a line of questioning that can be applied to analyse a text through queer pedagogy:

What is queer about a particular character?

What physical characteristics mark the queer?

What cultural norms does he or she appear to threaten?

How do these norms relate to contemporary ones?

How is [the text] "homophobic"? (Zeikowitz, 2002, p. 70).

Zeikowitz (2002) goes on to point out how students are met with two authoritative voices, namely the teacher and the author. Heteronormative readings of an author's work are often conducted if the teacher does not use their natural authority to open the classroom conversation to a queer reading, in this way inviting the students to collaborate in creating the text they are reading to gain textual authority (Zeikowitz, 2002, p. 76).

2.2.5 Teaching sensitive issues

Sara Ahmed argues that topics are deemed “controversial” or “sensitive” because they are relevant and current to the human beings in the classroom and that the self-esteem, feelings, and sense of identity of the students are in a sense at stake when handling these topics (Ferlazzo, 2016). Kelly (1986) states that the best position to take as a teacher when dealing with sensitive issues is that of committed impartiality, meaning that the teacher should state their own opinion but also make room for other perspectives giving all sides of an issue a fair hearing, in this way impartially presenting different ways of thinking for students and letting them decide what they think for themselves (p.130). Barton and McCully argue that invoking the ability of students to take part in discussions with people who do not share their opinion in a controlled manner is part of the job of an educator, and if emotionally charged issues are not addressed, student’s engagement and sense of relevancy for their education might become lacking (2017). Barton and McCully further state that there are no easy ways or any established rules for teaching controversial issues, which is why teachers must meet their students’ unique needs using their professional expertise (2007, p. 13).

The teaching of *Frankenstein* while relating to topics from queer theory could potentially prove sensitive or even controversial for some students. The teacher should therefore make sure to open discussions to focus on several interpretations of the reading while also stating their own opinion, and make sure that the classroom discussions are civil, controlled and steered forward by a firm but gentle hand, making sure that the classroom remains a safe space for all students to voice their opinions.

3 MATERIAL AND METHOD

This section provides a presentation of the materials and methods employed in this paper.

3.1 Material

This paper makes use of the edited and revised 1831 version of *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, which is the version that has a wider commercial print, rather than the original 1818 edition. According to Anne K. Mellor, the 1831 version falls short on account of it going too far from the original conception of the author in areas such as style, voice and even story, editing away Victor's sense of responsibility for his actions (1996). This paper uses the 1831 version since the excerpts chosen are identical in both versions, along with the fact that the 1831 version is more widely available for both teachers implementing the strategies suggested in this paper and for students who, based on the excerpts read in class wish to read the novel in full, will be more likely to find this version in a library.

As mentioned in the introduction, rather than the novel in its entirety, three excerpts from the novel have been chosen for being central points in the novel and for their obvious relevance to being related to queer theory, both for this paper's analysis and for being used as teaching materials following the pedagogical strategies presented in this paper. This format of presenting *Frankenstein* (1831/1994) in a condensed form will focus the teaching on the proposed perspective and keep the students' focus on the theme with less risk for distraction or disengagement. Additionally, a filmization of *Frankenstein* (Whale, 1931) will be used for teaching suggestions in the analysis.

3.2 Method

This paper seeks to investigate how Mary Shelley's 1831 novel *Frankenstein* can be read and further understood through a queer perspective for upper-secondary students in the English classroom. This was done through the method of close reading, or a careful textual analysis where in an initial stage the novel was ciphered through for passages that could be fit for the teaching of queer theory. Initially several of the characters displayed the potential of being

analysed through a queer lens, but because of the limitations in the length of the present paper, a special focus has been granted to the character of the unnamed creature. By close association, some attention will also be given to Victor Frankenstein, partly due to his presence in the excerpts and partly because of this paper's reading of him as a queer character. The selected passages featuring crucial moments of the creature's storyline were then examined through a queer lens and broken down into an analysis fit for the comprehension and level of its target audience. The close reading this paper seeks to implore is one of a queer nature, since the selected passages were from an initial reading singled out for their distinct queer content.

According to Hall (2003), a queer reading is always equal to a close reading, because it tends to focus on the nuance and complexity of a text. Bennett and Royle (2004) state how a queer reading of literature goes beyond the simple attribution of homosexuality to a character but focuses on queering the narrative of a text by looking at the gaps; what the author could symbolically be referring to, seemingly be leaving out, or what double-meaning apparent heteronormative depictions could harbour (2004, pp. 189–191). As Alexander Doty states in his essay *Making things perfectly queer*, queer readings must not be thought of as “alternative, [...] wishful or wilful misreadings, or ‘reading too much into things’ readings” (1993, p.16), but should instead be looked at as stemming from the complex spectrum of queerness that was to be found in the original work all along. Expanding on the notion of queer readings of literature overanalysing an original work for the preferred meaning, Hall (2003) underlines the importance of a queer reading being built upon a foundation of textual evidence and a grounding in theory, as well as the necessity to feel free to separate the text from the author's original intention since doing that closes off the text and constrains it. This sentiment is illustrated in Barthes' *Death of the author* wherein a text is described as a space of multiple dimensions of interpretation rather than holding only one single truth (1968).

4 ANALYSIS

This section will present and analyse three relevant excerpts from *Frankenstein* as potential teaching materials for the suggested reading, in the probable case that there is no time or option to read the novel in its entirety during the English 7 course. A recapitulation of the story outside of the extracts is provided for the reader of the present paper, as well as being fitted to an appropriate level for the prospective English 7 students to understand the general plot points of the story behind and in between the excerpts.

4.1 Extract 1: The creature's creation

The first extract I propose teaching is located in the fifth chapter of the 1831 edition of the novel and it is narrated through the perspective of the protagonist Victor Frankenstein.

4.1.1 Summary

Victor Frankenstein is born into a wealthy family in Geneva, Switzerland and from an early age becomes interested in science. He goes to study at a university in Germany with the chosen subjects chemistry and natural philosophy. Before leaving for school, his mother dies. In his grief, he becomes obsessed with the secrets behind the creation of life and performs many experiments on diseased body parts. In a way that is undisclosed to the reader, Victor succeeds in “bestowing animation to lifeless matter” (Shelley, 1831/1994, p.63), and quickly sets about to use his newfound knowledge in creating a person from body parts void of life as illustrated in this extract:

With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its

limbs. How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! - Great god! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of lustrous black, and flowing: his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips (Shelley, 1831/1994, p.69)

After this extract concludes, Victor leaves his experiment to fall asleep and has a nightmare featuring Elizabeth, the woman he is set up to marry, turning into the corpse of his dead mother as he kisses her for the first time. The chapter culminates on the anxiety and regret-ridden Victor who escapes his apartment that contains the creature because he fears his creation. He then meets his childhood friend Henry Clerval, who takes care of the deeply shocked and troubled Victor. When they later return to Victor's apartment, the creature has disappeared without a trace.

4.1.2 Analysis

This first central part of the story where the formation of the creature's life and consciousness occurs sets the tone for the reading as well as adds suspense and makes the students understand how the creature came into the world. The excerpt presents the main characters Victor Frankenstein and the unnamed creature that is brought to life by Victor inexplicably and mysteriously. As evidenced in the excerpt, Victor Frankenstein refers to his creation using the words "thing", "creature", and "it" before the spark of life yet has entered their body. After the creature has opened their eyes and moves for the first time, Victor transitions to exclusively referring to the creature in his inner dialogue with the masculine pronoun *his*. This is done as a

default because it can be inferred that at least some of the body parts that Frankenstein used in the creation of the creature were male. Even though a person's body may be interpreted and gendered in a masculine way, that does not necessarily signify a masculine gender identity and it should not be interpreted as belonging to someone necessarily comfortable with masculine pronouns. As Baron (2020) states, the generic pronoun *they* is suited for referring both to people whose gender identity is unknown or not yet confirmed, and to people who identify themselves outside of the traditional gender binary. Although Victor does not outright use this masculine pronoun in reference to the creature, his usage of it in his inner dialogue still speaks to the point of how he forcefully administers a binary gender system upon an artificially created human composed of body parts from several different unidentified bodies. While a close reading of this first extract and the summaries before and after it does not disclose the creature's gender identity and certainly not their preferred pronouns, since they focus on their basic needs in the period after their awakening, Victor Frankenstein's act of gendering the creature acts as a metaphor for how most people, including those gender non-conforming, are gendered solely corresponding to their outward appearance and not after consideration of their gender identity.

The creature's body is presented as being comprised of beautiful parts that when they start to move instantly are perceived by Victor as hideous and frightening. It is unclear whether it is Victor's perception of the creature that changes from one moment to the next, or if the sudden movement of the body scares him because of his presumed internal or even subconscious association with masculinity as threatening. When the creature transforms from an inanimate object to a supposed subject inhabiting life, they are gendered, thus referred to as a human being by Victor, but still treated as an inanimate object. Victor does not move closer for an inspection after their first movements of life, nor does he touch the creature or even once addresses them. The dehumanization of the creature is sad, but also ironic since what Victor set out to do and was convinced that he could do was to create human life. Following Bagocius'

sentiment of the creature being a manifestation of their makers' closeted queerness (2022), the dehumanization, degradation, and outright fear that Frankenstein harbours towards the creature can be read as pure projection and his inner qualms can be interpreted as him battling his own identities. Immediately following the extract detailing the creature's awakening, Frankenstein has a dream portraying his first kiss with his prospected wife as a horrible nightmare where she turns into his dead mother, which also relates to his closeted queer self trying to persuade him into not going through with the marriage to Elizabeth.

The teacher should bring up the topic of the description of the creature in a class discussion, taking account of students' first impressions of them based on the extract, asking questions such as how the narration of Victor affects our perception of the creature, as he shifts from describing them as beautiful and then wretched, using masculine pronouns. Would lustrous black and flowing hair typically have belonged to a man in this period, and even if it did, and the creature was made up of male body parts, would that be enough to infer that they *are* a man? What if the creature's brain or nervous system were taken from a woman's body? To understand the character of Victor, the class discussion should then be ushered by the teacher towards finding different possible motivations behind his creation. The death of his mother makes Victor obsess with cracking the code for creating life, in this creating the role of a birthing mother for himself. Is his end goal to bring his mother back to life, or does he subconsciously or not wish to take her place, "birthing" a prodigy to establish a similar bond to the one he had with his mother? The class should be encouraged to look beyond the classic interpretation of a scientist trying to push the edges of scientific possibility. This could be a part of it, or even what Victor tells himself his motivation is, but what is going on inside his head?

Depending on the level of class commitment, a way of bringing the famous scene from the excerpt more to life could be to incorporate a showing of a clip from the black and white 1931 film adaptation with Frankenstein's famous line "Look! It's moving. It's alive. It's alive..."

It's alive, it's moving, it's alive, it's alive, it's alive, it's alive, IT'S ALIVE!” (Whale, 1931, 24:50–25:03). Since this scene might be what a few students can recognise it will cater to the proposed preconception of the student, and it will bring up an interesting comparison of the original text and its creative adaptation. Other works of contemporary popular culture using the Frankenstein trope are films like *Edward Scissorhands* and *Corpse Bride*, and tv-shows like *The Simpsons*, *Saturday Night Live*, and *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Universal Monsters Wiki, n.d.). A compilation of video clips or a slideshow of pictures of these examples will further cement the novel and its modern adaptations in a context of popular culture that is known and appreciated by students.

4.2 Extract 2: Identity questioning

The second extract of the novel belongs to the thirteenth chapter of the 1831 edition, where the reader is now invited to view the story from the creature’s narrative.

4.2.1 Summary

The creature is reunited briefly with their creator, Victor Frankenstein, and tells him of their experience with starting to understand their senses and with satiating their primary needs like food, water, and shelter, and in doing so accidentally encounters random people who either become scared or aggressive upon seeing them. They find a hut connected to a small cottage and rest there. They watch the cottagers through a slant through the wall and are amazed to see their familiar love and to see humans who are not escaping their gaze. Through listening and watching the family they slowly learn how to understand and produce speech and to read, by watching lessons between two of the cottagers and by reading books they come across. The creature’s alienation from themselves and other’s perception of them continues, and the creature describes their perception of themselves in this manner:

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 with 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? 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! [...] From my earliest remembrance I had been as I then was in height and proportion. I had never yet seen a being resembling, or who claimed any intercourse with me. What was I? The question again recurred, to be answered only with groans (Shelley, 1831/1994, pp. 150–151).

Following the conclusion of this extract, the creature goes into more detail explaining to his creator Victor Frankenstein all the life stories of the villagers they were able to pick up on during their time of quiet observance in the shed adjacent to the cottage. Victor's reaction to the creature's story is one of horrified fascination.

4.2.2 Analysis

In this extract, the creature has gained the ability and opportunity to communicate with their maker Victor for the first time. The creature tells a tale full of angst and alienation lamenting that they do not see their likeness in any other being, therefore concluding that they must be monstrous, supported by the reactions of every living being they have encountered since they opened their eyes for the first time. Mourning their complete lack of any type of information

about their maker, and their dissonance with the world around them and themselves, the creature experiences a strong sense of identity questioning. This identity questioning is sparked and strengthened by the creature's feelings of self-loathing and despair, feelings that are named by Bagocius (2022) as being synonymous with queer shame, meaning the frustration and indignity within someone that emerges from having queer feelings or a queer identity that they do not act upon or embrace. While Bagocius' (2022) reading of the identity of the creature is loosely defined as queer and hints at a homosocial or romantic sentiment towards their maker, this paper's reading positions the creature as experiencing queer shame towards the confusion over their identity, which will later be specifically developed into gender questioning that is expanded further on in the analysis of the next extract. The identity questioning is evident in the creature's thought "When I looked around I saw and heard of none like me" (Shelley 1831/1994, p. 150). This sentiment tells the reader that the creature has gained enough of a sense of themselves and their being to start comparing themselves to the people around them but fails in finding their perceived likeness in anyone. Whether the sought-after likeness refers to a match with the creature's outer appearance or their personality is not mentioned, but since the extent of human interaction the creature has experienced has been people fleeing in fear or chasing after them to attack, it seems like both can be found true. From these fleeting encounters, the creature has not yet observed any physical equivalent to them, but they similarly have not been able to show their personality or had the time to learn about anyone else's to any true extent to be able to find an intellectual and emotional equal.

The display of an inner monologue filled with identity questioning that the current extract provides resembles a universal adolescent experience of searching for who you are and for your place in the world. Much like an adolescent person just having emerged from their childhood, the creature has emerged from their childhood of sorts, from a period where their consciousness was not yet fully formed, as they focused on meeting their primary needs of hunger, thirst, and

heat. They reject their acquisition of knowledge and new-found awareness of their situation and themselves because surviving in their previous state at least spared them the agony and sorrow that they now feel. As grounds for the pedagogical usage of this extract, framing the creature as the student's adolescent peer opens a philosophical conversation about the grounds for happiness and what defines us as humans. The creature deduces that they would be happier without having gained knowledge of the world, but could the creature in their "childhood" era truly be described as them experiencing happiness, or would blissful unawareness be a more fitting description? The creature's humanity emerges with gaining a sense of themselves and the people around them and deepens with their ability to understand and produce speech. For them to lose these abilities would require the equivalent of a lobotomy or otherwise damaging their brain's synapses. For the class discussion, the teacher should question the class about what in the creature's feelings aligns with their own experiences and if they can identify with the feeling of wanting to return to their childhood happiness. This discussion can prove to establish the timelessness of the creature's experience and provide an unexpected ground for identification for the students.

4.3 Extract 3: Gender questioning

The sixteenth chapter of the 1831 edition of the novel provides the third and final extract, offering a second view into the mind of the creature.

4.3.1 Summary

After having experienced more of the world and the people inhabiting it the creature has grown bitter and full of resentment. When they encounter a child in the woods they are intrigued and delighted, thinking that the child is a potential friend because of their supposed lack of resentment or fear towards them. The child instead screams in fear upon seeing the creature and

calls them an ugly wretch, and in trying to silence the child by gripping his throat, the creature instead accidentally strangles him. Then, the creature notices the child's necklace with a portrait pendant and experiences the following inner turmoil:

As I fixed my eyes on the child, I saw something glittering on his breast. I took it; it was a portrait of a most lovely woman. In spite of my malignity, it softened and attracted me. For a few moments I gazed with delight on her dark eyes, fringed by deep lashes, and her lovely lips; but presently my rage returned; I remembered that I was forever deprived of the delights that such beautiful creatures could bestow and that she whose resemblance I contemplated would, in regarding me, have changed that air of divine benignity to one expressive of disgust and affright. Can you wonder that such thoughts transported me with rage (Shelley, 1831/1994, p. 180)?

The plot following this extract revolves around the endless rage that the creature feels following their realization of these emotions, and, in a panic, they escape to a seemingly empty barn where they find a strange woman sleeping. Likening their sentiments towards the strange woman to those towards the woman in the portrait, the creature wants the woman to suffer and plants the portrait taken from the child in the strange woman's pocket, effectively placing the blame for the murder of the child on her. They then escape their surroundings once again.²

4.3.2 Analysis

This excerpt culminates the creature's pondering of their identity as it extends into gender questioning, where a queer reading of their display of emotions upon viewing a portrait of a woman reads as gender dysphoria towards their self-image and as feelings of envy directed at the woman in the portrait. The creature's feeling of malignity, defined as "a deep-seated often

² This last excerpt does not include the ending of the novel, since the teacher is meant to encourage the students to seek out the novel on their own to promote their independent reading.

unexplainable desire to see another suffer” (Merriam-Webster, n.d), could originate from the disconnect between others' perception of them and their inner self, and the rage this instils gets directed towards someone that in the creature's perception is content in the role given to them, or at the least is assigned with positive qualities from other people's perceptions. The “delights” that the creature feels deprived of might be the experience of having their outward appearance match the gentleness of their insides, and the woman in the portrait might be one of the first adult women they encounter after gaining the consciousness and thinking ability required to start reflecting upon their identity. If it is truly their first encounter with the image of an adult woman during their short lifetime, the conflicting feelings they experience can also be explained with a great deal of confusion as the creature tries to come to terms with what they are feeling.

From another perspective, a heteronormative reading would instead view the creature's feeling towards the woman as heterosexual attraction or desire, inferring the sexuality and identity of the creature as a heterosexual male and the woman in the portrait as female. The part of the excerpt wherein the creature contemplates and mourns the prospected reaction of the woman after looking at them is arguably diametrically in opposition to the thoughts a male-coded monster bursting with a sexual desire fuelled by rage would have. The creature does interpret the portrait as having beautiful qualities, they compliment the woman's eyes, lips, and hair, but speaking against this interpretation is that the rage supposedly fuelled by sexual frustration does not produce any advances of that nature towards the woman they encounter in the barn, though they feel the same rage upon seeing her.

Throughout the excerpts when reflecting upon the gender identity of the creature, there emerges a certain kind of liminality or indistinguishability which is eloquently expressed by Judith Butler:

[T]he monster may well be carrying that excess of gender that fails to fit properly into “man” and “woman” as conventionally defined. If the monster is really what a “man” looks like when we consider his aggressive form, or if this is really what a “woman” looks like when her own gendered place is destabilized [...] then the “monster” functions as a liminal zone of gender, not merely the disavowed dimensions of manhood, but the unspeakable limits of femininity as well (Butler, 2014, pp. 47–48).

Applied to the present queer reading of the creature, the liminal zone of gender that Butler names as monstrous in the creature is instead interpreted by the current reading as being represented by a trans or non-binary identity, depending on how the experienced feelings of non-identification with the gender expressions the creature has been a witness to would be resolved. If the creature would be thought to become at peace in their identity if they would take steps to liken their gender expression to either side of the scale of the gender binary they would be read as inhabiting a trans identity, whereas if their feelings of non-identification were to be validated in any way so that they could feel at peace in their liminal space of gender, they could be read as having a non-binary gender identity. The creature's constant lack of familiar support throughout the excerpts suggests that it can be derived that the creature might have been accepting of themselves and their norm-bending appearance and feelings if they were to have been accepted and supported from the moment they were created, either by their parental figure and maker or by the friendly and supportive people of a chosen family. Even if they were to encounter kinship of some sort only later in their lifetime, possibly by the time of the third extract, it is indicated that they would embrace affection and acceptance of any kind if it were offered, by the hopefulness and excitement of the creature in encountering the child in the forest. As this goes beyond the scope of the extracts and the novel in its entirety, these are mere reflections.

The creature's perception of the portrait of a woman is very appropriate for a class discussion on different interpretations. One view could be that the creature's feelings of delight and attraction towards femininity resemble gender questioning and longing for belonging to a different gender than that which was assigned to them at birth; and one reading could be that the creature's attraction towards the woman is of a sexual, heteronormative nature and what they feel deprived of is closeness to a woman. Students would be encouraged to form their own opinion on the nature of these feelings and ground their views in textual evidence, from the extract or the extracts as a whole or from the way a certain sentence is phrased. Another point of class discussion could centre around the creature's act of planting the portrait pendant on the strange woman they encounter, effectively blaming the murder of a child on a strange woman. Based on the extracts, the teacher should pose the alternatives: Is this act to be judged as the creature acting of their own free will and immoral nature, in other words, does the creature seem like someone who would purposefully strangle the child and blame the woman? Alternatively, were the acts simply regrettable and accidental consequences of their emotional state, a direct product of the unfortunate experiences and mistreatment of the creature, with their creator being the true culprit? Further, the teacher could let the class come up with arguments for the two sides, possibly even putting the class into debate pairs or smaller groups where both sides would lay out the evidence and arguments for their respective side, following a presentation of the best arguments for each side that could then be presented to the class.

5 CONCLUSION

Three excerpts from the novel *Frankenstein* have now been analysed, chosen both for their queer qualities and for being highlights of the novel's storyline. While the possibilities of queer interpretations can be stretched far in the analysis, it is simultaneously possible to provide space for alternative readings in a classroom context. Highlighting the importance of an open dialogue

accepting of any interpretation grounded in textual evidence as a teacher is crucial so that students are not left with the impression of there being only one true and correct interpretation of this novel or any piece of literature for that matter.

The linkage of queer theory, based on the perception of the social constructs of gender and sexuality and how that influences our society, and the Swedish National Agency for Education English 7 guidelines demonstrates several corresponding points. Queer theory is a form of critical theory which is found in the guidelines, along with existential and ethical questions paired with social, cultural, historical, and political issues in different contexts and areas where English is used, relating to the student's knowledge and experiences. New subject all-encompassing guidelines underline the importance of among other things understanding gender-related power structures and holding a critical view on portrayals of relationships and sexuality in different mediums, issues that are closely linked to the maxims of queer theory.

Throughout the analyses of the excerpts, *Frankenstein* has been found to portray two different queer identities, namely those of Victor Frankenstein and the creature. Though the latter has been the unequivocal focus of this paper, Frankenstein himself displays a state of queer shame that has been deduced to be linked to his closeted homosexuality. His hidden and refused identity is manifested in his creation, which produces hatred and fear in him, making him abandon the creature. The creature on the other hand goes through an identity crisis largely produced by not having any guidance or help in their formative period, and by the experienced dissonance between their sense of self and the others' perception of them, only being able to cultivate their knowledge by observing a family in secret. The identity crisis culminates in a questioning of their own gender identity when being presented with the image of a woman. The creature's sorrow over not judging themselves as capable of producing the same emotions in others as they feel while viewing the woman's portrait sends them into emotional turmoil over the conflict between their inner identity and how others perceive them.

The possibilities of teaching *Frankenstein* through a queer lens to English 7 students have proved to be abundant, with every excerpt offering different angles. In the first excerpt, Victor's unreliable narrative and default gendering of the creature affects the reader's perception, which brings up the subject of pronoun usage and how that relates to an individual's identity. In the second excerpt, the creature displays a timeless adolescent experience through their identity questioning, which is an important part of finding someone's queer identity. Delving deeper into their identity questioning in the third extract, the creature exhibits the traits of gender dysphoria because of the clash between how others view them and their view of themselves, thereby cementing their identity questioning as that of gender questioning. While it is beside the point which exact label can be applied to the creature's queer identity, this topic of classroom discussion along with the ones raised from the other excerpts effectively brings a classic literary work together with the concept of queer theory to form engaging and modern pedagogical content.

Regarding future directions for research that the scope of this paper has not been equipped to cover, there is an opportunity to apply a queer reading to the relationships and identities of Victor Frankenstein and his relationships with his childhood friend Henry Clerval, or Captain Robert Walton that Frankenstein encounters at the end of the novel.

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