

Final Project: The Foundations of a Serial Killer

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The Foundations of a Serial Killer

In the midterm essay, I performed a film analysis of Norman Bates and Buffalo Bill and compared that research to the real-life stories and psychological profiles of Ed Gein and Edmund Kemper. This comparison led me to conclude that Serial Killers are often not born but have been made after having experienced some sort of abuse or neglect. In this essay, however, I will attempt to connect how these experiences could turn someone into a serial killer. My main question is, how does a child's experience of events such as abuse or neglect lead to the individual feeling the desire to take one's life? The majority of the time, we equate some mental illness that the individual developed to leading to this desire; however, many have the same psychological disorders exhibited in serial killers but yet don't ever become violent. In Unit 6, a fellow classmate theorized that Frankenstein's creature had experienced alienation during his upbringing and that this alienation is what causes the creature to experience the desire to kill. In an attempt to understand if alienation is the root cause of serial killer behavior, this paper will attempt to explore the defining attributes of society's view on alienation and its many forms. Then I will conduct a literary analysis of alienation and how it is presented within Mary Shelley's telling of *Frankenstein* by exploring the serial killer character referenced as Frankenstein's creature.

The term alienation was first coined by Karl Marx, a German philosopher, and economist better known for his published work known as *The Communist Manifesto*, a political pamphlet concerning the nature of society and politics. However, in another work by Marx, called the *Economic & Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, he laid the foundations of four forms of alienation: "The alienation of individuals (workers) from the product, from economic activity, from their species-being, and the alienation of individuals from one another" (Christ). Then in 1959, The American Sociological Association published a review from the University of California called "On the Meaning of Alienation" in this paper; Melvin Seeman established five alternative meanings apart from Karl Marx's ideal of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement (Seeman). Seeman here seeks to connect alienation to the belief that human behavior is determined by both a person's characteristics and the social situation. Seeman seeks to understand what happens when an individual begins to feel one of these five variants of alienation, but I question what happens when an individual experiences all five of these forms of alienation. In patients who experience mental illness, we often associate the developed mental disorder to the development of any of these three different factors, biological ones such as genetics or brain defects or injury,

psychological factors such as abuse or neglect, or environmental stressors such as death and divorce, social expectations, substance abuse, or changes in life such as with jobs or schools (WebMD Editorial Contributors and Bhandari). However, the experience of one or more of these factors doesn't typically equate to an individual going on a murderous rampage. Therefore, could it be instead that an individual has to experience all five forms of alienation that Seeman referenced to break down one's mental capacity enough to desire the urge to kill?

If the planted seed of serial killer behavior does lie within alienation, did Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, written in 1818, already show this "real world" perspective in her serial killer character? In Mary Shelley's tale of *Frankenstein*, Doctor Victor Frankenstein gives life to a creature from parts of dead bodies after discovering the secret of life. However, Doctor Frankenstein exhibits disgust and horror at what he has done instead of having the natural behavior similar to how a woman would react after having given birth to a human child. Instead of accepting the creature with a loving embrace and nurturing the creature's understanding of the world, Doctor Frankenstein shuns the creature and abandons him to the cold new world that he is now a part of. Frankenstein's creature eventually finds his maker again, and after doing so, he imparts the story of how he wasn't born as a monster but instead became one through the shaping of events from the world of humanity. This is where we can start to see parallels between alienation and the creature's experiences.

In Melvin Seeman's work *On the Meaning of Alienation*, he clarifies that meaninglessness refers to when an "individual is unclear as to what he ought to believe-when the individual's minimal standards for clarity in decision-making are not met" (Seeman). On page 123, the creature says, "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?" (Shelley, 2003, P.123). In this statement, we see the creature begins having a hard time understanding his own existence. Because he was left with no guidance on how to seek clarity to his questions, the creature starts to experience the form of alienation known as meaninglessness.

Later in the book, the creature comes upon a cottage, and through a dwelling, the creature finds a small hole, allowing him to watch a small group of cottagers and learn from their daily activities. The creature begins helping the cottagers through daily chores in secret; however, as time passes, the creature develops a fondness for the cottagers and desires to one day come out of the shadows and present himself to them in the hopes that they will accept him as one of their own and love him. However, the creature's visible differences and past experiences with mankind cause the creature to feel powerlessness in the ability to be able to change his features and become more like the humans or to have the ability to erase the cottagers' fears and hate that would give rise once he revealed himself to them. According to Seeman, powerlessness is when the individual comes to hold the belief that their own behavior cannot determine the manifestation of the outcome in which they seek (Seeman). On page 136, the creature admits this form of alienation to the blind old man cottager when the creature finally attempts to reveal himself, "I am an unfortunate and deserted creature, I look around and I have no relation or friend upon earth. These amiable people to whom I go have never seen me and know little of me. I am full of fears, for if I fail there, I am an outcast in the world forever" (Shelley, 2003, P.136).

In Seeman's view, isolation is not when an individual goes through a period without being able to converse with their peers socially. Instead, isolation is more when the individual experiences the feeling of detachment as a member of the community in which they live (Seeman). Upon the return of the rest of the cottagers, the creature is struck repeatedly with a stick until the creature leaves the cottage. Feelings of heart-sinking sadness swept over the creature; however, despair did not take over as he still had hope that the cottagers would eventually accept him. However, upon returning to the cottage, the creature finds that the cottagers are leaving. Once the cottagers go, the creature begins to feel isolated from the world of mankind. This feeling of isolation starts to lead him to feelings of anger and hate, "But again when I reflected that they had spurned and deserted me, anger returned, a rage of anger, and unable to injure anything human, I turned my fury towards inanimate objects" (Shelley, 2003, P.140). This anger and hate lead the creature to feel normlessness; he begins to think that he will never truly be accepted by humankind. This feeling allows him to cut his empathy towards humans away and allows him to commit deviant behavior. Seeman derives his ideal from the term *anomie*, introduced by a French Sociologist named Émile Durkheim from a study on suicide; *anomie* is described as a condition of instability resulting in a breakdown of values or lack of purpose (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia). Seeman takes this meaning and adds that when an individual experiences this breakdown, their point of view may become twisted into the expectancy that

their unaccepted behavior is required to achieve their desired outcomes (Seeman). In *Frankenstein*, the creature comes upon a child named William, whom the creature learns is the youngest brother of Frankenstein; upon hearing this news, the creature then kills William in an attempt to achieve the desire for revenge upon Frankenstein.

Some days after, the creature confronts Frankenstein telling him that only a creature like himself could accept him, for that he was not like humans but something else and therefore, devises a plan to end his isolation, “I am alone, and miserable; man will not associate with me; but one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me. My companion must be of the same species, and have the same defects. This being you must create” (Shelley, 2003, P.146). Doctor Frankenstein first accepts this bid toward the hope of establishing peace between himself and his family from that of the creature. However, after creating a female creature, Frankenstein begins to wonder what will happen if he gives life to the female creature. What if the female creature rejects the male creature, or what if the female creature rejects the male creature’s plan of isolation away from humanity, these questions stir in Frankenstein’s mind until he decides to no longer go through with it and destroys the female creature. Frankenstein’s action leads to the creature feeling the last form of alienation, self-estrangement, due to his treatment by all humanity the creature had come upon, and therefore, because of all of his experiences with mankind being hostile, the creature becomes the very monster that humankind deemed him to be, the creature tells Frankenstein “I am malicious because I am miserable. Am I not shunned and hated by all mankind.” Here the creature admits that his deviant behavior is no longer from feelings of anger and revenge for another but instead from no longer finding enjoyment in other activities. Seeman argues that self-estrangement is when one loses the ability to find self-rewards from meaningful activities.

In conclusion, one can clearly argue that Frankenstein’s creature went through all of the alternative meanings of alienation described in Melvin Seeman’s *On the Meaning of Alienation*. However, one thing that needs to be mentioned is that from my analysis above, one can see that Frankenstein’s creature had killed before reaching all five forms of alienation. Does this mean that someone doesn’t have to reach all five to murder? I believe this question would ring true as a resounding yes! Because when Frankenstein killed William, he did so out of revenge. What sets serial killers apart from singular-event murderers is that singular-event murderers typically kill because of an upsurge of uncontrollable passion from feelings of jealousy, revenge, fear, or anger. However, once those feelings reside, naturally, the individual would begin to feel some form of remorse and regret for what they have

done. But yet if the question is can someone become a serial killer without reaching all five forms of alienation? Here I believe *Frankenstein* points to no. I think what makes most of society question how serial killers can do what they do and think of them as monsters is that serial killers often are seen as non-empathetic to the point where they seek out the psychological thrill of killing someone for their own self-pleasure. After Frankenstein's creature experiences self-estrangement, the creature doesn't kill for revenge upon Frankenstein or the world; no, he kills because it has now become part of him, and because of this, when he does murder, he finds enjoyment, even if it may be in small dosages and fades with time. Upon first thoughts of the creature of *Frankenstein*, I initially thought of the creature as not of the same caliber as that of other serial killers; however, after a more careful reading, I believe Mary Shelley's tale of Frankenstein's creature indicates what makes a serial killer in its most accurate form. Mary Shelley seemed to be ahead of her time, and I believe it's unfortunate that most of society regards her work primarily due to the themes presented with Doctor Frankenstein playing GOD. So what is it that I think Mary Shelley was trying to tell us an audience? I think she points to how someone feels when they have been alienated and what a buildup of alienation can do to even the most innocent of creatures. When an innocent child experiences all of these forms of alienation because of the abuse or neglect they endure, is it now any wonder how these events could turn an innocent into a monster?

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