Frankenstein: What Qualities Can Define A Human?

In Shelley’s novel Frankenstein, a key idea that was raised was the qualities that define a human. Whilst the monster is physically not human, he can be considered to possess more human qualities than his creator, ironically. It is clear that in this sense the monster perhaps deserves to be pronounced as the ‘protagonist’ of the novel, as in comparison his characteristics prove to be more benevolent and justified. This is displayed in the monster’s friendliness, the lack of compassion in Frankenstein, and the different ambitions of the two characters.

The monster is first shown to be internally human from his initial friendly attitude towards people. Like any human would, Frankenstein’s monster wanted to befriend other intelligent beings since he was created. In almost all of the monster’s early encounters with humans, he tried to express kindness and friendship, even despite being hurt by them. The monster’s desire for acceptance from the family was expressed in chapter 12, where he states that he “longed to join them, but dared not” (pg 128). Following this ambition, the monster begins to master the language of the family and read books: “... with a fresh ardor to the acquiring the art of language” (pg 134), further proving the extent that he would go to make friends. It is clear that the monster was almost obsessive with befriending others, therefore proving his humanity to the audience.

Compassion is an important human quality that Frankenstein’s monster possesses, whilst, to a degree, Frankenstein himself does not. Although Frankenstein may show compassion towards his fellow human beings, he does not show it towards his creation. By playing God, Frankenstein must take full responsibility for his creation and father it - however, he does not do this and abandons him from birth. Furthermore, Frankenstein rejects his monster purely based on his appearance, having said: “His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God!” (pg 58). This suggests that even had the monster been beautiful, Frankenstein would not care for him out of compassion, but instead out of hubris.

Conversely, the monster shows compassion to everything, even to the humans that have repeatedly hurt him. This degree of compassion, even in the face of despair, demonstrates a level of humanity that is unparalleled by his creator. For instance, in chapter 16, after being rejected by the family he cared so dearly about, the monster, on his own accord, proceeds to save a child who was about to drown. This example displays his natural and impulsive compassion towards other beings and also hints that he saved the child not for self-benefit, but as an act of sympathetic goodwill. In comparison to his creator, the monster shows far more compassion, and he shows them in an unprejudiced fashion. In this way, the monster can be considered more human than Frankenstein.

Lastly, the monster can be considered more human than Frankenstein in the sense that he has a more human ambition.