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Critical or Creative? The Creature Writes to Victor Frankenstein

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ABSTRACT

This essay considers the relative merits of critical writing and writing in role as a means of enabling and assessing students' responses to literary texts. Drawing largely on the author's experience of teaching *Frankenstein*, it argues that the distinction between critical and creative writing is not as absolute as is sometimes supposed, and that so-called 'creative' tasks can be a very effective way of generating critical insight. It explores the significant limitations and limiting potential of the critical essay as a form, and argues that creative tasks such as writing in role afford far greater opportunities for school students to write fully and successfully as themselves. It links the longevity and pervasiveness of the critical essay as a mode of assessment within the English school system to its 'exam-friendliness', and makes the case for an alternative and more equitable approach that would allow for young people to be judged on their true potential as thinkers and writers.

KEYWORDS

Criticism; creativity; writing in role; pedagogy; assessment

The defining moment of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and of the lives of its two protagonists – the eponymous Victor Frankenstein and the unnamed Creature – is that of the latter's creation. In this moment an assemblage of dead body parts, culled from graveyards and abattoirs, miraculously becomes a single living self. It is both Victor's tragedy and his crime that he simultaneously desires and fails to anticipate this event: though he can contemplate a being painstakingly constructed from carefully selected organs and tissues, the point at which this construct becomes a subjectivity, with its own needs, point of view and agency, is the point at which he rejects it.

Shelley's novel can thus be seen to present two opposing ways of thinking about the condition of individual human life: as a generalisable and repeatable collection of physical parts, animated by a discrete spark; or as a unique and sentient self, subject to the constant interplay of thought and feeling and with an orientation towards the social. Viewed in this way, *Frankenstein* serves as both matter and metaphor for this essay, in which I draw on my experience of teaching the novel, and in which I consider the relationship between, and the respective merits of, two very different forms of writing. Or more specifically, two very different forms of written response to literary texts: namely, the critical essay and the mode of creative writing generally described as writing in role. I explore the value of writing in role as a means of enhancing essay-writing and as

an end in itself, while at the same time challenging the primacy accorded the critical essay as the means by which students of literature in England are overwhelmingly assessed. Underlying this part of my argument is the suggestion that the distinction between ‘critical’ and ‘creative’ responses to texts is not as marked as is sometimes supposed. I consider the inevitably but unhappily close relationship between the critical essay and those forms of standardised assessment that lend themselves to high-stakes public examination. And finally, I question whether the current regime of high-stakes testing to which nearly all young people in England are subject can truly be considered either equitable or humane.

Writing in Role: The Creature’s Letter

In my former career as a teacher with particular responsibility for English Literature A Level,¹ much of my time was spent preparing students to write critical essays. This was necessary work: with one partial exception (OCR allows for one coursework task, worth around 7.5% of the total qualification, to take the form of a piece of recreative writing), the four main exam boards in England² now assess English Literature A-level students exclusively on their ability to write analytically about literary texts. I quite frequently set my students the task of writing in role as specific literary characters, since this activity felt like particularly useful preparation for character-based essays, and was also well suited to opening up perspectives in texts that are hinted at but left implicit. Thus, the Governess’s mysterious reference early on in *The Turn of the Screw* to ‘disturbing letters from home, where things were not going well’ (James [[1898] 1969] 1969, 31), a detail to which Henry James teasingly never returns but which suggests the possibility of psychological disturbance, provided matter and form for a letter of reply, in which students were able to explore their own interpretative stances on the Governess’s possibly troubled state of mind in this most brilliantly ambiguous of novels. Writing a diary entry in the person of Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire* allowed for the exploration of the largely unarticulated interiority of the character who is arguably the least interesting of the play’s protagonists but who holds the most power: a significant aspect of *Streetcar*’s appeal for the audience lies in waiting to discover who Stella will choose to ally herself with – her husband or her sister. And asking students to imagine themselves as Caliban writing in the sand at the end of Act IV of *The Tempest*, after his second betrayal, by Stephano and Trinculo, demanded that they investigate Caliban’s thoughts and feelings at this crisis point in the play: thoughts and feelings that Shakespeare leaves largely unspoken, though having carefully laid the ground for them in his representation of Caliban’s first betrayal, by Prospero.

In content and expression my students’ writing in role was very often distinguished by thoughtful, subtle and sometimes profound insights into the literary texts on which it was based. (This was true across the spectrum of institutions in which I worked as an A-level teacher, which were characterised by rather different levels of attainment.) Occasionally it even seemed possible to trace quite direct connections between students’ writing in role and the essays they subsequently produced. My student Maria,³ for example, explored Caliban’s intimate knowledge of and connection to the island on which *The Tempest* is set – ideas that Caliban himself expresses forensically but lyrically in the play – in an extended metaphor, according to which Caliban sees himself as

a firmly rooted apple tree, which will continue to produce deeper roots, thicker branches and ‘ten times more apples’, the more it is robbed of its own fruit. In her essay on Caliban, Maria developed this point to make the argument that this valuable knowledge is not recognised by Prospero or Miranda. These characters, Maria wrote, ‘fail to see that Caliban is already educated in his own way – Caliban is able to communicate and understand the island that was once his’. Maria’s writing in role as Caliban also took us in interesting directions as a class: towards a post-colonial interpretation of *The Tempest*, and towards Sean McAvoy’s environmentalist and new historicist interpretation (2014) which, noting the conspicuously English flora and fauna of this supposedly remote island, links the play to the dubious speculations of early 17th-century London-based entrepreneurs, whose commercially driven schemes to drain the fenlands of eastern England resulted in the partial destruction of a unique habitat.

As this example suggests, the quality of my students’ work seemed to be evidence in itself for the value of writing in role. But I sometimes found it hard to overcome the anxiety that my tendency to set the kind of work I enjoyed reading (and responding to this kind of writing was always a welcome relief from marking essays) was selfishly motivated. An invitation to deliver a lecture on A-level teaching to trainee English teachers, in which I wanted to argue for writing in role, was enough to prompt me to test my assumptions about the usefulness of this kind of work by asking my then students what they felt about it. At the time I was working in a sixth-form college and teaching *Frankenstein* to two A-level classes. Together we had already explored the first account of the episode in which the Creature comes to life – narrated, significantly, from Victor’s point of view – and as a homework task I had asked my students to imagine that they were the Creature and had learned to write – as the Creature eventually does. In this role, they were to write a letter to Victor describing the moment of their creation from their (i.e. the Creature’s) point of view. My intention was to encourage students to explore the Creature’s perspective on this episode and thus anticipate his own first-person narrative as it appears a little later in the novel. I also wanted them to investigate the Creature’s complex characterisation and distinct and problematic position in the world, and to speculate on how he acquires language and an education before encountering the relevant passages in Shelley’s text. And since I was preparing my classes for an examination unit in which understanding of ‘context’ was heavily weighted, I wanted them to explore *Frankenstein’s* fragmented narrative structure and its theme of liminality, since these are both common features of the Gothic genre (literary context), and to relate the Creature’s tragic marginalisation to the Romantic obsession with outsiders (socio-cultural context). I had also just set an essay on monsters in the novel, for which this creative task was partly intended as preparation, so once students had completed both pieces of writing I gave one class a brief questionnaire on their experience of the creative task.

The questionnaire consisted of five questions and I gave students 10 minutes of lesson time to complete it. This probably wasn’t enough, but I felt self-conscious about spending longer on it. I was new to the college and to its explicitly exam-focused culture, and not yet confident enough to feel comfortable in asking my class to do something that might have felt to them like a waste of time. The questionnaires were anonymous, for the obvious reason that I hoped students would be frank and less inclined to produce answers

that they thought might please me, though they had the option to identify themselves (none did). Of the 22 students in the class, 20 were present on that day, so the responses given below are taken from those 20 questionnaires.

It seems worth saying at the start that the great majority of answers to my questions were positive. This pleased me, of course, but also surprised me a little: though this was a polite class, whose members tended to respond respectfully and compliantly (though sometimes with slight puzzlement) to the things I asked them to do, they were collectively academically ambitious, and I had felt that they might have regarded writing in role as a bizarre distraction from the business of composing exam-style essays. In the analysis that follows I have quantified the responses to expose this overall proportion of positive answers, while selecting examples that reflect the range of their opinions. It also seems worth pointing out that students wrote very perceptively about what they had learned from writing in role, such that the questionnaire itself fulfilled a metacognitive function. Had this occurred to me at the time, I might have thought more about incorporating opportunities for this kind of self-reflection alongside creative tasks.

My first question, *Did you feel this task gave you further insight into the novel?*, elicited 14 affirmative responses and one 'no', while five students left it unanswered. One student exemplified perfectly the central premise of writing in role: that putting yourself in the position of a character necessitates exploration of that character 'from the inside'; though their answer also conveys how the writing task encouraged them to think about Shelley's intentions, or perhaps about the echoes between Shelley's life and her novel (a more fruitful line of enquiry than is the case with many writers), or both. '[I]t made me put myself into how I thought the monster would feel', they wrote, 'and why Shelley would write it like this'. Another explored the issue of point of view in more technical terms, describing how the exercise had enabled them to grasp a significant aspect of the novel's structure: 'I was able to gain another POV into the text, which is useful in identifying if VF is an unreliable narrator'. One of the most perceptive answers to this question, in its description of the lasting and damaging effects of rejection at the start of life, seemed to pick up on the subtle and moving ways in which the Creature's behaviour in his first encounter with his 'parent', Victor, echoes that of a baby, thus perhaps reflecting our current understanding of the neurological, psychological and emotional damage of neglect in early years: 'it displays how from the moment the Creature was born it was doomed and would be excluded'. A further response suggested that, as I had hoped, writing eloquently as the Creature had encouraged the writer to dwell on this self-acquired attribute: 'it strengthened the idea of the eloquence of the Creature'. Another made explicit a further positive aspect of writing in role, that it necessitates close and attentive reading: 'really read thoroughly creation chapter'.

My second question, *Did it give you further insight into the character of the Creature?*, was more closely tied to the writing-in-role task in its exploration of the Creature's point of view, which is perhaps why it elicited an even more enthusiastic reaction, with 19 positive responses to one negative. Once again, individual answers testify to the critical insights that the task generated. One student wrote that 'the "birth" of the Creature is only described physically whereas this task made us consider the emotional underlayers'. This is both true and hints at a deeper truth, namely Victor's understanding of the Creature's genesis as a scientific rather than a human process, an experiment rather than a birth. Another response, though tantalisingly inexplicit, reveals how writing as the

Creature enabled the writer to focus on one of *Frankenstein's* most interesting structural aspects, the characteristically Gothic trope of doubling: 'I thought about the *doppelgänger* interpretation of the novel'. A further answer both anticipates the Creature's transformation from gentle innocent to murderer, exemplified in his declaration that '[m]isery made me a fiend' (Shelley [1831] 1999, 78), and hints at the relationship between nature and nurture that the novel explores, and which reflects the influence of Locke and Rousseau: 'You realise he is vulnerable and can be shaped/moulded into peace/destruction'.

Students' answers to my third question, *Were you able to use any of the thinking it involved in your essay?*, were less positively weighted: nine students answered 'yes', seven 'no', and four gave no response. It is perhaps a mistake, though, to expect to be able to identify too exact a correlation between the thinking required for one task and another, even though, as my story of Maria's writing demonstrates, such connections can sometimes be traced. In any event, students still had encouraging things to say in response to this question. One wrote that 'the sense of confusion the creature feels at rejection from its creator helped when trying to decide if Victor is to blame'; and another that 'I think it made me further understand the relationship between Frankenstein and the Creature and made it clear that the nature of Frankenstein's creation is the true monstrous act of the novel'. Students were collectively more enthusiastic about the *general* value of the task in relation to their critical writing about *Frankenstein*, in response to my fourth question, *Can you envisage using any of the thinking involved in future essays/your exam?* Fourteen answered 'yes', two 'no', one wasn't sure and three didn't respond. One of the answers struck me in particular for its engagingly modest self-contradiction and the rich interpretation it hints at: 'Not a huge amount but I could write about psychoanalysis + the id + the doppelgänger'. Later in the year it became possible to identify this writer from her contributions to class discussion as a young woman who was studying psychology and who was able to apply her cross-curricular understanding to developing a sophisticated interpretation of *Frankenstein* based on Freud's theory of personality.

Responding to my fifth question, *Did you enjoy the task?*, 14 students reported that they did, three that they didn't, while three responses were equivocal. The positive answers hint at dimensions of experience that will form part of my later argument: in addition to the pleasure involved, or as an aspect of it, students acknowledged their lack of familiarity with this kind of writing; and several recognised the intellectual dimension of writing in role. One reported that it 'was different, and something that I hadn't done for years'; another that '[I] don't like creative writing but it stretched [my thinking]'; another that 'I love creative tasks and it was slightly challenging'; and a fourth that '[a]t first it was hard, a strange task but in the end I loved it'. I had been aware when setting this final question that it sat slightly at odds to the rest, as it was not in any obvious sense about academic value. I was clear at the time that I wanted to ask it but didn't push myself to consider why, beyond acknowledging the important connection between pleasure and motivation in the classroom. Now I think that what lay behind my determination was a sense of the significant relationship between enjoyment and creativity: significant because it seems to imply some sort of self-expression and self-fulfilment. My students' answers to all five questions suggest very strongly that there is hard intellectual work involved in writing in role, or in other words that these kinds of writing task are 'critical' as well as 'creative'. My fifth question comes, I think, from a desire to explore in a fuller sense what the value of this type of writing might be, and whether it might, in its

relationship to individual subjectivity, have a privileged place in the classroom and more to offer of value than the critical essay. This is not, though, to imply a simple binary opposition between the two forms. The process of creation, including creative writing, can feel tortuous (one way to read the laborious ‘birth’ of the Creature is as a metaphor for the arduousness of creativity: Shelley herself referred to *Frankenstein* as her ‘hideous progeny’ (Shelley [1831] 1999, 5)). Conversely, the process of essay-writing can bring its own satisfactions. And if writing in role affords rich possibilities for the development of critical insight, conventional critical writing can, in a limited sense, be creative, in that it allows for the articulation of individual interpretations (though more on this later).

Rochelle and Naima

This seems an appropriate point at which to introduce some student writing. The two examples I shall be considering come from a different cohort of students than the one to which my ‘questionnaire’ class belonged. The following term I taught *Frankenstein* again, to two classes with whom I had a slightly different relationship: they and I had joined the college at the same time and I had therefore had a greater role in contributing to their sense of what A-level English looked like. I think it may have been for this reason that they collectively threw themselves with greater enthusiasm into the task, producing letters that were more richly detailed, thoughtful and interesting than those I had received the term before (despite the responses to my questionnaire, these had generally been a little disappointing). My new classes had also already read *Frankenstein* in its entirety, and although this meant that the letter task had less value as a predictive exercise, their knowledge of the novel as a whole informed their writing. It is partly for these reasons that I have chosen to analyse two letters from this cohort, though there is another, which I will explain later. Before I consider these individual examples, though, it seems worth mentioning a further aspect of the writing produced by these classes. I had forgotten, as I often did when setting written work, to suggest that students word-process their writing so as to take advantage of the possibilities for redrafting, editing and proofreading that word-processing affords. Despite this, a far larger proportion of students handed me typed work than I was used to receiving when setting essays, and the writing overall displayed a much higher degree of finish. This level of care and attention is significant, I think, because it suggests an intensity of engagement with the task that the day-to-day business of writing critical essays did not produce. (My usual, frequent attempts to persuade my classes to edit and proof-read their essays can best be described as a losing battle.)

Rochelle’s letter falls into this category: it is word-processed and flawless in its presentation. It is also powerful, articulate and controlled. When devising writing-in-role tasks I tended to specify very simple forms, typically letters or diary entries, so that students would concentrate their creative energies on responding to the literary text they were exploring rather than on negotiating the conventions of a complex text type. That said, Rochelle makes impressive use of one of the defining conventions of a formal letter: the opening salutation. Her Creature begins thus: ‘Dear Victor, my abandoner whom I loathe and love most ardently’. Rochelle’s decision to address Frankenstein by his first name is interesting: it implies an intimacy that conveys the closeness of creator and created – the fact that they are, despite Frankenstein’s repeated attempts to cast off his

creation, bound together from the moment of the Creature's 'birth'. At the same time it subverts their quasi-familial relationship – few children address their parents by their first name – and may be read both as an insistence on the Creature's equality with Victor, his equal right to have his experience respected, and as a comment on Victor's inadequacy as a parent. The brilliantly apt and powerfully polysyllabic verbal noun 'abandoner' is also highly effective. Abandoning is of course what Victor does best: not just the Creature but his family, Clerval and Elizabeth too. Moreover, Rochelle's neologism mimics those titles typical of history and mythology, according to which individuals are nominated by their defining acts (think Old and Young Pretenders; or the Four Disgracers of Greek myth, Tantalus, Icarus, Phaethon and Ixion, who defied the gods and were terribly punished for their hubris). Next, in her use of the alliterative antitheses 'loathe' and 'love' Rochelle neatly encapsulates the terrible paradox of the Creature's relationship with Victor: where the Creature should love his 'father' he can only loathe the man who created him merely to abandon him, but though loathing Victor is the most appropriate emotional response he cannot help but love him, exclaiming in 'grief and horror' (Shelley [1831] 1999, 167) at his eventual death in the final pages of the novel (note, though, how Rochelle reverses the more natural-sounding order of the two verbs, thus putting the subtlest of emphases on 'loathe'). Rochelle's choice of 'ardently' is again semantically apt; it also, along with the intensifier 'most', constitutes a deft and subtle archaism that both reflects the date of Shelley's novel and, more impressively, the archaisms of the Creature's own speech, which Shelley intends, perhaps, for the reader to understand as the poignant result of his acquiring spoken language partly from old books.

Rochelle sustains the theme of the Creature's paradoxical feelings into the first two sentences of her letter, which serve as a powerful opening: 'You are the being I hate that I can never hate. I hate that despite how hard I try, I cannot hate you'. In their carefully pitched blend of forceful directness and formal eloquence (note, for example, how she avoids contracting 'cannot') Rochelle creates an impassioned but high-flown rhetorical tone, which she sustains more or less throughout her piece. This lends weight to the Creature's words and point of view, reflects his actual voice in the novel, and draws attention to his astonishing and fascinating eloquence, in which he rivals even Victor. Rochelle's 'letter' is full of such interpretative insights. Her Creature refers, for example, to his own 'so-called heart' and 'so-called lungs', conveying the Creature's disgust at what he perceives as his own physical subhumanity. He also accuses Victor in terms that suggest the agony of a child that feels themselves to have been insufficiently loved, reflecting once again the novel's concern to convey Victor's irresponsibility by construing his relationship with the Creature as one of a negligent parent:

Why was I not enough for you? Why did you abandon my wretched, impotent soul? I wish for you to possess knowledge of the fact that you have served as a profound disappointment; you have let your creation down. I could write the words over and over again; I could scream it at the top of my so-called lungs and let this cruel world know that you have hurt me in an unimaginable, ineffable way. Such hurt cannot be explained or described. I could keep the hatred for you deep inside of me and let it hide there safely as a reminder of the pain you have inflicted upon me. But I am the only one who knows that it exists and lets it eat away at my so-called heart. What am I? Why did you create me?

The last sentence of this extract continues the theme of accusing children in a manner reminiscent of the cry of all anguished adolescents: 'I didn't ask to be born!'. It also, of course, echoes Adam's agonised address to his 'father' and creator, God, from *Paradise Lost*, which serves as epigraph to *Frankenstein*:

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mould me? Did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me? (Shelley [1831] 1999, 11)

We had devoted a lot of class time to discussing the relationship between Milton's text and *Frankenstein*, and Rochelle returns to this relationship when she has her Creature declare to Victor: 'My experience as your creation has been a living hell'. Here, she echoes Satan's famous line from Book IV of *Paradise Lost*: 'Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell' (Milton [1667] 1966, 276). This implied comparison between the Creature and Satan echoes the Creature's own: 'the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil' he says of himself in the final pages of *Frankenstein* (Shelley [1831] 1999, 169). And in making the comparison Rochelle is both recognising the intertextual relationship between *Paradise Lost* and *Frankenstein* and subtly raising the question that lies at the heart of Shelley's novel. Is the Creature a monster, and if so, is he more or less of a one than Victor? Rochelle makes this point herself when, with a finely attuned ear for a resonant ending she concludes: 'You regard me as a monster, Victor, but are you not one yourself, for if I am truly a monster, I am then a reflection of you, my creator'. Her words seem to go beyond the suggestion that the Creature and Victor are each the double of the other in their monstrosity and to return to another of the novel's preoccupations: the relationship between creator and created. As we have seen, Shelley herself lays the ground for this interpretation when in her introduction to the 1831 edition she refers to the novel as her own malformed child.

Throughout her letter Rochelle is fully in control of her writing from the technical point of view. As is evident from the extracts I have quoted, her sentences are skilfully constructed vehicles for her meaning and her punctuation is expressive and assured. She is also, on the whole, admirably restrained in her lexical choices. Every now and then, though, she chooses a word that, like 'ardently', leaps out at the reader because it is both striking and apt. Her delight in finding and using 'ineffable' to describe the Creature's pain is perhaps a little naively conveyed by the sentence that follows, '[s]uch hurt cannot be explained or described', since 'cannot be explained or described' seems to echo the dictionary definition of 'ineffable' closely, but it is still a powerful and appropriate word in this context. Similarly effective is her use of 'abysmal' in the following beautifully balanced structure: 'I have endured such heartache and pain; I have felt and done such abysmal things'.

The same degree of assurance and control characterises the second piece of writing I want to analyse here, by my student Naima. Naima touches on some of the same themes as Rochelle: the representation of Victor's irresponsibility as analogous to that of a negligent parent; the intertextual relationship with *Paradise Lost*; and the related question of who the real monster, the fallen angel, actually is. Overall, though, she

takes a different approach and one that perhaps follows more closely the official remit of the task. Her writing involves an intense focus on imagining the Creature's experience in his earliest moments, of which this extract is typical:

My eyelid lifted exposing my pupils to beams of light which pierced them from every direction. Everything was hazy; nothing but a blur and my ears were ringing like alarm bells causing my mouth to explode with indistinguishable sounds. The vibrations travelled from my windpipe to my mouth like wind howling through the trees and by opening these two finely carved pieces of skin, these vibrations transformed into bellows and grunts.

This passage is striking on several counts. In the first place it is based on an attentive reading of Shelley's text. Naima is elaborating on the Creature's description of his first moments as it occurs later in the novel, when a 'strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard, and smelt, at the same time' (Shelley [1831] 1999, 79). She has also gone back to Victor's very different account of the moment of creation: her reference to the Creature's single 'eyelid' recalls Victor's description of the first sign of life in his creation, when he 'saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open' (*ibid.*). Naima expands on the synaesthesia that the Creature describes by connecting the sensations of ears and mouth, in a way that reflects the actual biological connection between these two organs. What seems to underlie her narration is an attempt to imagine what the experience of a newborn baby as it enters the world might be like, and indeed she appears to confirm this in the sentence that follows the passage quoted above, which, though faintly clichéd, perfectly exemplifies the Creature's paradoxical and vulnerable condition. A walking oxymoron, he has, in her words: 'The size of a man, the mind of a new-born and a heart with the capacity to love the world'. Moreover, in her detached, almost clinical description of the vibrations that 'travelled from my windpipe to my mouth' Naima seems to be trying to evoke the production of pre-verbal sound, or more precisely of sound produced to awaken and exercise tissues rather than make meaning. At the same time the simile she uses to describe the sound produced, 'like wind howling through trees', is both suitably Gothic and suggestive of a melancholy that prefigures the Creature's tragic life. Her description of the Creature's mouth as 'two finely carved pieces of skin' is bizarre, but no less bizarre than the thing that it describes, and serves to remind us of the constructedness of the Creature. And not only his constructedness but his monstrosity – a monstrosity of which he himself is painfully aware, since these are supposedly his words. Later in her 'letter', Naima has the Creature describe his own creation thus: 'A few manmade pieces stuck together to form a living object; what blasphemy!' Here, she seems to catch and mimic Victor's tone when he exclaims with heavy irony: 'His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! – Great God!' (*ibid.*, 45). In Naima's text, in the extract cited above, this manufactured monstrosity is reinforced by the animalistic 'bellows and grunts' her Creature recalls making, and Naima picks up on this a couple of paragraphs later. Addressing Victor, the Creature describes how 'you sat there trembling, waiting for me to brutally murder you with my bare hands. You thought of me as a beast'. There is of course an irony here, since the Creature, whose 'capacity to love the world' has made not the slightest difference to his ability to find a place in it, will go on to murder William, Justine, Clerval and Elizabeth with those same 'bare hands'.

As in the novel, Naima's Creature is as terrible as he is pitiful. With an ear for a resounding conclusion as well-tuned as Rochelle's, her letter ends thus:

You will be held accountable for what you have done. You will feel the pain that I have endured, and you will once again experience those restless nights you once had for I am scouring the land in search for you. You have created me without any given purpose, so I shall take it upon myself to give me one; to destroy you.

Naima's suggestion that it is this desire to destroy his creator that finally lends the Creature's existence shape and purpose is insightful: it is his and Victor's perfectly matched determination each to exterminate the other that drives the final section of *Frankenstein*, with its extraordinary, neurotic force and suspense. And her ending is also technically controlled and highly expressive. One might wish for a comma between 'had' and 'for' in the second sentence, but otherwise her sentences are carefully shaped and punctuated to serve her meaning. The anaphora of the repeated 'you will' is powerful in suggesting the Creature's dominance and determination. And 'scouring', an uncommon, rather literary and appropriately harsh word, is effective in this context.

I have chosen to focus on these two pieces on the basis of their merits: merits that my extended exposition has in part been intended to demonstrate. My other reason for choosing them, though, is that Rochelle and Naima both struggled with essay-writing: in the context of what was admittedly a high-achieving institution they generally appeared near the bottom of the markbook. Rochelle, who loved English, tended to write at great and diffuse length: she had difficulty in selecting her material and arranging it into appropriately terse and structured arguments. Interestingly, given how finely tuned her Creature letter is to Shelley's text, she was also prone when writing essays to often quite glaring misinterpretations. And like many students, she clung to the idea that essay-writing necessitates a special, artificial subvariety of language that goes beyond mere register: a prolix and overly formal discourse that involves frequent recourse to the thesaurus and thus the inevitable misuse of words with which one is unfamiliar. Naima's essays contained much careful thought and she was a sensitive close critic, but she also struggled with organising her material into the kind of well-sequenced arguments demanded by the genre of the critical essay. She found it difficult to maintain the right balance between text and context and to use the requisite terminology correctly: both skills demanded by the specification we were following. Her essay-writing was not especially fluent or accurate, and was characterised by colloquialisms that made it seem naïve and that undermined the force of her arguments.

The issue of these two students' different levels of performance in the respective genres of writing in role and critical essay-writing may seem negligible, but I want to suggest very strongly that it is not. Indeed, it will form the basis for the next part of my argument, since it raises the crucial and fundamental question of how and why we assess: with tasks that allow our students to shine or that cause them to struggle. This question becomes more acute if it is possible to argue that the former category is at least as valuable as the latter, or that the latter is limited in the learning potential it affords.

Analysis Versus Recreativity

There is a profound ethical problem with any education system that sets its students up to fail. Much of the rhetoric that surrounded the introduction of the 2014 National Curriculum centred on the concept of rigour, with its underlying assumption that sheep must be separated from goats (Gove 2010, 2013a, 2013b; Gibb 2015). The breezy confidence with which the notion of ‘rigour’ is bandied about in much contemporary educational discourse belies, ironically, the lack of genuine rigour applied to it. Why is it necessary to separate sheep from goats? What hierarchies are at play in this distinction and what assumptions, values and beliefs underlie those hierarchies? In other words, and to push the analogy further, why are sheep better than goats (or is it the other way round?)? And who gets to decide? Moreover, even if we take this discourse on its own terms those terms turn out to be suspect, since it is possible to argue that the forms of teaching, learning and assessment typically encouraged by the current National Curriculum do not qualify as rigorous in any meaningful sense. To return to the practical terms of my argument, is the critical essay necessarily a rigorous form, in the sense of involving real, interesting and valuable intellectual challenges, at least in the way in which it plays out in most school classrooms? And is it more rigorous than writing in role?

It is worth, I think, spending a little time considering the critical essay as a form, though this is a challenging task in itself since the genre has such a central and long-established place in the teaching of English Literature that its value is taken for granted. It is undeniably the case that critical writing entails the development of certain skills and forms of knowledge that have a place in secondary education. Some of these, such as the construction of a well-sequenced argument or the marshalling of evidence in support of that argument, are common to all discursive writing and are certainly valuable in the extensiveness of their application. Others are specific to English Literature as a subject, and include: the knowledge and understanding of certain concepts – genre, for example, or tragedy; familiarity with the gamut of literary techniques and their attendant terms; and the ability to describe the effects of these techniques in context. And the critical essay does, theoretically at least (though more on this later), afford space and opportunity for the writer to develop and articulate their own interpretation of a text or texts.

I would argue, however, that the critical essay also has its own particular and peculiar limitations. Some of these, as I shall suggest presently, relate to the ways in which it is taught and assessed in school, but some are inherent in the genre. The critical essay is in the first place highly formulaic. It necessitates a particular structure – introduction, linear argument, conclusion; and a particular tone – a kind of formal and dispassionate clarity. It has been my experience that students tend to find the latter aspect of critical writing particularly difficult, tending either, in their belief that a kind of special language is required, to resort to the thesaurus (like Rochelle) or to lapse into jarring colloquialisms (like Naima). Part of the challenge arguably lies in the requirement, in a bizarre elision of the inherent (though constrained) subjectivity of literary criticism, to empty out the ‘I’ from one’s writing, in the sense of using passive constructions in place of active ones. Thus, ‘the Creature can be seen as Victor’s *doppelganger*’ instead of ‘I think that the Creature is Victor’s *doppelganger*’, or even ‘I feel that the Creature is Victor’s *doppelganger*’. This contradiction is neatly encapsulated by Joseph North, who describes how criticism as a genre ‘asks students to cultivate something like a “personal” relationship

to specific literary texts by means of extended and careful reading' while insisting on 'exactitude, meticulousness, and something approaching "scientific" precision' (2017, 23, 24). And as with 'I', so with 'you'. The critical essay has no readily identifiable audience: it is projected into a vacuum.

It also has other, oddly contradictory characteristics. On the one hand, the analysis of literary texts is a kind of anatomisation, a taking apart of constituent elements prior to reassembling them in a different form: a process akin to that by which Victor constructs the Creature. (It is worth remembering that 'analysis' and 'anatomy' share the same Greek prefix, and that 'anatomy', as in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, is sometimes used to describe a detailed analysis.) Critical essays, to extend my analogy, are operations performed on texts, and performed according to accepted protocols and with the illusion, at least, of appropriately clinical detachment. My use of 'protocols' here is deliberate: the term is sometimes used in a scientific context to describe the records made of experiments, and it was doubtless with this sense in mind that I. A. Richards used it for the critical commentaries collected from his Cambridge undergraduates on which his influential *Practical Criticism* (1924) was based. In this respect, Richards exemplifies a much broader early 20th-century phenomenon, namely the widely recognised attempt to lend the emerging discipline of literary criticism professional (i.e. academic) respectability by presenting it as quasi-scientific (Eagleton 2001; North 2017). This tendency is perhaps most famously represented by T. S. Eliot's essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in which the generative relationship between individual creativity and the literary tradition is compared to 'the action that takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide' (Eliot [[1919] 1975] 1975, 40). Simultaneously and conversely, though, the critical essay is associated with the act of appreciation. The operations of literary criticism have traditionally been applied to texts conventionally deemed worthy of study. Indeed, literary criticism and the canon exist in what might be perceived as an unhealthily symbiotic relationship. Literary texts are deemed worthy of canonical status because they supposedly *possess* value, while canonical status in turn *confers* value. The medium through which this circular process of valorisation chiefly occurs is literary criticism. Indeed, one way of defining what counts as a 'literary' text might be by considering whether the genre of literary criticism has been, or might successfully be, applied to it. By the same token, some types of texts – spoken word poetry, for example, or genre fiction – often fall outside the scope of academic study not because they lack value or significance but because they do not lend themselves to conventional modes of literary-critical analysis.

There are several problems with this interrelationship of criticism and canon. In addition to the circularity of the process by which the status of the canon is maintained, there is the issue of how the canon constructs readers. Construed as a collection of revered texts, whose status, deriving from a supposedly stable system of universal values, is beyond question, the canon makes its readers subject, constructing them as passively worshipful and delimiting the nature and range of their responses. Logically, therefore, the canon implies a uniformity of response, a kind of ideal but generalisable single reader and thus an ideal but generalisable single critic.

The peculiarities and indeed limitations of the critical essay become more acute in its current manifestation in the English school or college classroom, which reflects the externally imposed requirements of exam-board and national curricula. Thus, the unit for which Rochelle, Naima and their peers studied and wrote essays on *Frankenstein*

required them, in addition to demonstrating the kinds of skills and forms of knowledge already mentioned, to compare Shelley's novel with another Gothic text, assess both texts in relation to context, and refer to multiple interpretations of both texts. More specifically, and in the language of assessment in which all teachers and students must become fluent, their critical writing was produced in relation to a set of assessment criteria with prescribed weightings (AO1: writing well, 12.5%; AO3: context, 50%; AO4: comparison, 25%; AO5: different interpretations, 12.5%). Thus, the formula inherent in the critical essay as a genre was overlaid by another equally prescriptive one, requiring students to undertake the academic equivalent of a military assault course in order to achieve even vaguely respectable marks.

The weighting given to context in this scheme of assessment is worth drawing attention to because it typifies a further aspect of the critical essay as it is currently taught, written and examined in schools. The redesign of A-level specifications in the wake of the 2014 National Curriculum resulted in a greater emphasis on exploring texts in relation to contexts – increased from 20% to 30% of the total qualification, though this shift arguably represents the continuation of a trend established several decades earlier with the introduction of Curriculum 2000 (Atherton 2005, 164–170). The weighting accorded AO3 at GCSE⁴ at this time was set by the Department for Education at 15–20% of the total English Literature qualification (DfE 2013, 6); in practice the four main exam boards weight it at either 15% or 16%. It has been my experience that teachers and exam boards alike tend to interpret 'context' in the sense of 'contexts of production', namely the particular combinations of socio-historical, cultural and biographical factors that give rise to literary texts; rather than 'contexts of reception', as in the circumstances that determine the responses of audiences and readers, including contemporary ones. This emphasis on contexts of production arguably reflects what North has described as the 'scholarly turn' in academic literary criticism, according to which literary texts have been increasingly treated as 'opportunities for cultural and historical analysis' rather than a 'means of cultivating readers' aesthetic sensibilities' (2017, 2). It also probably owes something to the recent shift in England to what is commonly referred to as a knowledge-based or 'knowledge-rich' curriculum, under the influence of figures such as E.D. Hirsch (1988): though relationships between texts and their originating contexts cannot be proved in a scientific sense, exploration of them seems to belong to the world of the reassuringly stable and knowable. But by the same token, this is an aspect of the critical essay that neutralises individual responses. For students to write about Shelley's Creature as a product of Romanticism, valid though such an approach may be, is for them to turn aside from what he means to them.

The assessment criteria that determined the essays written by my students in class were also those by which they were judged in their final, public examinations. The spectre of these exams haunts this essay, but before I return to the issue of standardised, high-stakes testing and the ever-lengthening shadow it casts over secondary schooling, I want to explore the value and potential of writing in role. I have already suggested that, as my A-level students recognised when responding to my questionnaire, this kind of writing, although ostensibly a 'creative' activity, involves hard intellectual work. The idea that the sort of 'playfulness' involved in what is, after all, a form of *role-playing* might count as work should come as no surprise. As anyone who has spent time with small children or is interested in child development will know, playing is often very hard and serious work indeed, involving a purposeful and meaningful extension of the self. In Vygotsky famous words, '[i]n play

a child always behaves above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself' (1978, 102). Andrew McCallum, exploring the value of what he defines as *recreative* tasks, which include writing in role and which involve the 'self-conscious manipulation of source material to bring something new into being', argues that they entail a kind of intellectual activity akin to the very process of learning:

For learning involves working on new material or on what is already known to bring advanced or new meaning and knowledge into being. The existing knowledge of students and the additional material to which they are introduced is *re-created* at the point at which learning occurs (2012, 54).

While acknowledging that this description might be loosely applied to all forms of creativity as well as to learning, McCallum considers the particular value of *re-creativity*:

The *re-*prefix makes explicit the intention to work actively upon and *transform* specific material; it cultivates careful thought about source material and encourages a direct comparison between an original and what it inspires. Thus it demands reflexivity, requiring students to think carefully both about the impact of resources presented to them in lessons and about what they do with them (*ibid.*).

In the case of writing in role, as my A-level students acknowledged in their questionnaires and as Rochelle and Naima's work demonstrates, this 'careful thought' often takes the form of significant critical insights. In other words, this form of writing at its best is as rigorous as the most scrupulous and sophisticated criticism as traditionally defined. At the same time, in its imaginative and recreative dimension, writing in role involves an extra level of endeavour and attainment that critical writing lacks. There is an irony in the fact that high-quality writing in role displays the very literary qualities that traditional literary criticism exists to venerate, and that are evident in Rochelle and Naima's writing. McCallum captures something of this reflexivity when he suggests that *recreativity* 'seeks to mirror, in some way, the creative process that brought the original into being' (55). More specifically, though, there are direct connections to be made between adopting a role and the powerful and sophisticated manipulation of language: connections to do with imaginative projection and the extension of the self. In Myra Barrs' words, 'the most important aspect of any form of roletaking is that it gives access to other experiences' (1987, 213). It is this capacity to project oneself into the world of a literary text and the experiences it communicates that gives writing in role its potential. In this sense, this form of writing serves an equivalent function to dramatic role play, acting as what Cecily O'Neill and Theresa Rogers, writing about the place of drama in the English classroom, describe as 'a bridge between the abstraction of the written word and the students' understandings' (1994, 51). This bridge is what enables students to generate valuable critical insights; it is also what enables them to write with power and subtlety in the voice of an adopted literary persona such as the Creature, giving 'access to linguistic resources that might never otherwise have been tapped' (Barrs 1987, 213).

Depending on the individual task, this powerful fusion between the 'I' of the writer in role and the 'I' of the character whose voice they are temporarily adopting is potentially matched by their address to a fictional but fully identifiable 'you', who may sometimes have a real-life correlative for the writer. As I have already suggested, Rochelle and Naima's writing in the persona of Shelley's Creature is lent force and purpose by its

address to Victor, a character to whom the Creature is necessarily and fatally bound and towards whom his feelings are complex and overwhelming. And part of the appeal of this particular task lies in the fact that the Creature's relationship with his 'parent', Victor, is a potential conduit for the accusations of anguished adolescence towards those who brought them into being. In this sense, writing in role is capable of fulfilling James Britton's justly famous formula for meaningful and successful writing, that 'children in school should write about what matters to them to someone who matters to them' (1982, 110). In this respect, it stands in marked contrast to the studiously impersonal genre of critical essay-writing. But writing in role also privileges the 'I' in another sense, in that it allows space for students to explore and express their own responses to literary texts more richly and freely than when writing to the complicated, challenging and constraining formulae imposed by the straitjacket of a critical essay, particularly one produced in compliance with exam-board specifications. As opposed to the ideal reader/writer in whom all permissible critical responses are subsumed, writing in role allows students to be repositioned as individual readers.

Danse Macabre

The more imaginative, creative and indeed intellectual freedom a writing task entails, the less amenable it is to assessment by predetermined and externally imposed criteria: responding to this kind of writing can feel like a challenge, albeit a welcome one. Writing in role necessitates what Douglas Barnes defines as the 'Reply' rather than the 'Assess' mode of teacher response:

The teacher's traditional task has two aspects which I shall call *Reply* and *Assess*. When a teacher *replies* to his pupils he is by implication taking their view of the subject seriously, even though he may wish to extend and modify it. This strengthens the learner's confidence in actively interpreting the subject-matter; teacher and learner are in a collaborative relationship. When a teacher *assesses* what his pupils say he distances himself from their views, and allies himself with external standards which may implicitly devalue what the learner himself has constructed . . . *assessment* is turned towards the public standards against which pupils must eventually measure themselves, whereas *reply* is turned towards the pupil as he is, and towards his own attempts, however primitive, to make sense of the world (1976, 111).

Barnes's two-part model recalls the terms of my opening analysis of *Frankenstein*. The 'Reply' mode as he describes it is essentially social, involving interactions between subjectivities that are finely tuned to one another. In the context of writing and its assessment this mode also acknowledges the irreducibility of individual creativity: that 'the whole is always more than the sum of its constituent parts' and that the interrelationship between those parts 'is always too complex to be itemised meaningfully' (Marshall and Wiliam 2006, 5). It involves approaching students' work on its own terms, attempting to reveal and respond to what is there – as I have attempted to do with Rochelle and Naima's writing earlier in this essay.

The 'Assess' mode, on the other hand, depends on the application of criteria derived from qualities that are both generalisable and repeatable. In relating this mode, to which the critical essay as essentially formulaic and impersonal is highly conducive, to the context of public examination, Barnes reminds us why analytical writing in its exam-friendliness has become the genre by which English Literature students are

overwhelmingly assessed – at A Level and at GCSE. It has also, by the same token, become the genre by which English Literature students are overwhelmingly *taught*. There is a perverse and unhappy logic in the way the current regime of standardised examinations determines everything that comes before it, such that devalued forms of teaching and testing are locked together in the ghastly spectacle of what Michael Morpurgo has described as a ‘*danse macabre*’.⁵ Even more unhappily, this process, which involves, on the one hand, the teaching of canonical texts that are often age-inappropriate in terms of difficulty and content, and, on the other, teaching methods apparently intended to disable personal and meaningful responses and reduce the classroom experience of English literature to an empty and tedious prescriptivism, is not confined to Key Stages 4 and 5⁶ but encroaches increasingly into the previously sunlit lowlands of Key Stage 3⁷ (Gibbons 2019; Hubbard 2017; Spielman 2018).

If our current examination system depends on the production of relatively valueless written tasks, or in other words on what Barnes calls ‘mainly presentational performance’ (1976, 146), the legitimacy of the system is itself open to question. To imagine a world in which young people are *not* subject to the meaningless and indeed damaging rituals of this form of standardised assessment is almost impossible, so conditioned are we to believe that things have to be this way. But recent grim events have, paradoxically, allowed for a glimpse into a different imagined world. I began writing this piece in the first summer of the Covid-19 pandemic, when in England (as in many other countries) public examinations were cancelled and plans laid for teacher assessments of their students to serve in place of examination grades. These assessments were discarded, in the vast majority of cases, in favour of a grotesquely crude algorithm, according to which results were determined on the basis of individual institutions’ past performance, and which saw young people allocated grades sometimes two or even three below those they had been predicted by their teachers. In the wake of a public outcry the algorithm was in turn discarded and teacher-assessed grades reinstated.

It is tempting to regard this episode as a brief, unprecedented and unrepeatable aberration. But to claim that the monstrous and scandalous application of a mechanistic and inhumane system to the individual histories, identities and destinies of thousands of young people was a one-off would be misleading. Our examination system as it operates in normal times involves the application of algorithms to the work of individual students, not least in the practice of norm-referencing, which ensures that a predetermined proportion of learners, judged against arbitrary and unpredictable benchmarks, will always fail. Moreover, despite the fact that proponents of exams tend to argue for their ‘rigour’, the process by which individual exam grades are produced, though mechanistic, is not objective, involving as it does a *subjectively* produced set of standards against which students’ performances are *subjectively* measured. And these processes are only the final stages in an already unjust system that operates to reinforce existing inequalities – of opportunity and resource – and elide existing differences – of class and culture (Yandell, Doecke, and Abdi 2020). In other words, it might be argued that the only substantial difference between the ‘Covid’ examination summer of 2020 and previous summers is that in ‘normal’ years students are permitted the luxury of participating voluntarily in their own downfall.

Perhaps the possibility of an alternative system, based on teacher assessment, will not completely die down now that it has been glimpsed, though the early signs are not hopeful.⁸ It has much to recommend it. The public and policy discourse on education in England has until recently been curiously silent on the issue of teachers as assessors, but as a system of ‘centre-assessed grades’ was put in place for the second Covid summer of 2021, it became more widely recognised, even in some unlikely quarters that teachers can be seen as better qualified than anyone to pronounce on the attainments (and thus the futures) of their students.⁹ Assessment is something that teachers do, in some form or other, every day of their working lives: it is an inseparable part of teaching and of their ongoing relationships with their students. Teachers are best placed to assess their students because they are sensitive to those students’ individual identities as learners and to the depth and scope of those learners’ potential achievements. And such achievements should rightfully be measured in relation to a far broader and richer range of tasks and according to more truly meaningful criteria than are permitted by the current system.

Conclusion

The pre-reading activity that involves comparing the cover designs of multiple editions of a text as a way of opening up different interpretations has a cherished place in the English classroom. It is a particularly generative activity in the case of *Frankenstein*, since a Google search reveals an astonishing range of designs – a tribute to the power, longevity and extraordinary openness of Shelley’s text. My favourite shows a gaunt but beautiful young man, whose sutures are only faintly visible and who touches and cradles his own face in a manner that suggests both self-discovery and self-soothing. It is a useful image to share with students because it provokes discussion of the Creature’s problematic status as Victor’s ‘child’ and his attendant childlike vulnerability, but I love it because in portraying the Creature as beautiful and vulnerable it reflects the skilful elision that Shelley effects: though we as readers know the Creature to be a murderer, we respond to him as loveable, innocent and wronged.

In their study of the Gothic genre, David Punter and Glennis Byron explore the role of monsters who, located ‘at the margins of culture . . . police the boundaries of the human, pointing to those lines that must not be crossed’ (2004, 263). In *Frankenstein*, the outwardly monstrous Creature bitterly recalls the *inhumanity* of the treatment he has received in the course of his short life in this, the final speech of the novel:

Once my fancy was soothed with visions of virtue, of fame, and of enjoyment. Once I falsely hoped to meet with beings who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of unfolding (Shelley [1831] 1999, 168).

Shelley’s novel has much to say to us as educators. If we are truly committed to making real a vision of education that recognises it as ‘a mark of what it is to be human, and to be valued as a full member of human society’ (Unwin and Yandell 2016, 139), then her Creature, that most marginal of literary characters who stands forever on the outside of everything, serves as a powerful figure for all those young people disadvantaged by a system that fails to acknowledge the ‘excellent qualities’ they are ‘capable of unfolding’, and denies them the fulfilment they deserve.

Notes

1. Advanced, or ‘A’ Levels, are the academic qualifications undertaken by 16- to 18-year-olds in England.
2. AQA, Edexcel, Eduqas, OCR.
3. All students’ names have been replaced by culturally appropriate pseudonyms.
4. General Certificate of Secondary Education, that is, the qualification undertaken by 14- to 16-year-olds in England.
5. ‘A Point of View’, BBC Radio 4, 9 September 2020.
6. The two years of secondary schooling that lead up to GCSE and the two that succeed them.
7. The first three years of secondary schooling in England.
8. Gavin Williamson, former Secretary of State for Education, declared in the summer of 2021 that: ‘We very much hope and intend exams will go ahead in 2022’. BBC News, 23rd June. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-57579211>.
9. According to Simon Lebus, interim head of the UK government’s qualification regulator, Ofqual, teacher assessment of pupils is a better and more ‘accurate’ way of awarding grades than formal exams, while having teachers grade their pupils on work throughout the year would give a more ‘holistic judgment’ than the ‘snapshot’ provided by an exam. *Independent*, 9 August 2021. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/ofqual-teacher-assessed-grades-exams-b1899662.html>.

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