

Facing the Monster:  
An Analysis of Disability and Misrecognition in Literature

Tommie McPhetridge  
ENG 401: Writing & Rhetoric: Disability Rhetoric  
December 2021

Monster (/mənstər/) derived from the Latin term *monstrum*, was originally defined as a divine omen, especially one that brings misfortune. This term eventually came to be used as a word defining the malformed shape of a child or animal. In modern times we define the term as an animal of strange or terrifying shape. Modern monsters are beings of horror and creatures of violence and doom. The term is typically reserved for beings deemed ugly, terrifying, and unimaginable. Due to its origins of bringing misfortune, we see monsters as evil creatures to be conquered or hidden from the world of light that “normal” humans live in. However, what happens when the being that everyone thinks is a monster is more human than they believe?

One of the most recognizable answers to this question comes from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. In the novel, the monster, henceforth referred to as the creation of Dr. Victor Frankenstein, is perceived by the entire world to be a monster. Victor had taken great pains to make every part of the creation beautiful, and by every right his creation should have amounted to beauty. However, starting in the first scene between the two characters at the creation’s conception, Victor took in the visage of the creation, marking its disfigurement and suddenly perceiving ugliness, monstrosity. But for a being described with fairly meticulous features, he should be perceived as human, different, but human. So how does the perception of something shift from “beautiful” to “monster” so quickly?

The Victorian freak show, popular between the 19th and 20th centuries, was often put on as a traveling expedition featuring monsters and freaks of nature, creatures who were not meant to exist but walk among the populace. The majority of the attractions of the freak show were not monsters or freaks, but people with disabilities. Through the freak show, disabled people became subjects to be viewed, stared at in wonder and horror by the audience. Today, modern society continues to stare, but not truly recognize disability. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, a disability

studies theorist, studied the concept of freak shows and staring at the disabled body extensively in her career. Garland-Thomson notes that disabled “monsters” are often simply an “icon of physical anomaly”, which poses a threat to the non-disabled body.<sup>1</sup> This threat of a different body is what develops a preoccupation of staring at the different body, making note of its difference and watching to see how it will react. Garland-Thomson goes on to note that the bodies of disabled people often serve as “icons upon which people discharge their anxieties, convictions and fantasies.”<sup>2</sup> This means to say that when the non-disabled body stares at a disabled body, they project their fears and beliefs about normalcy onto the one being perceived. This active staring and projection often results in misconceived notions of identity, bias, and ability.

Between the viewer and the viewed lies a sense of power, the viewer holding weight over the one being viewed. Staring at the disabled body and projecting fear and hatred onto the person being perceived can promote the theory of misrecognition. Matias Iser in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines recognition theory as the concept that “in order to develop a practical identity, persons fundamentally depend on the feedback of other subjects.”<sup>3</sup> This development of identity and its dependence on the perception of others gives way to its antithesis, misrecognition. When someone is perceived incorrectly, it denies their identity and experience. This concept of misrecognition creates a strenuous relationship between the one being perceived and their recognition of the self. By being misrecognized, the one being viewed

- 
1. Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability In American Culture and Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 36.
  2. Garland-Thomson, 56.
  3. Iser, Mattias, "Recognition", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

can develop a self-hatred, developed through the othering that happens from the one doing the viewing. This misrecognition can manifest through being perceived as lesser for having a different body, developing into a manifestation of the negative views that are thrust upon them.

For fear of misrecognition and the maladies it belies, it is not uncommon for someone with disabilities to hide their appearance or mask their disability, sometimes even literally. Hiding disability creates an even more damaging narrative when the disabled then become the perceived, as without seeing disability on a common basis creates a greater divide between the different body and the “normal” body. Garland-Thomson developed her theory of staring in her book, *Staring: How We Look*. She notes that when disability is hidden, it can be perceived as unusual and unacceptable, stunning the person perceiving the disability.<sup>4</sup> This othering of the disabled body creates a sort of fascination with it as one attempts to identify the different body, which “obscur(es) the personhood of its bearer.”<sup>5</sup> This fascination can turn to disgust or hatred, often alienating the one being viewed even further than before. It also leads to a greater chance of misrecognition as one tries to make sense of what they are seeing. Together, staring and misrecognition make for a dangerous combination with the disabled body.

As culture is shaped by media and media is shaped by culture, analyzing literature under the lens of staring and misrecognition can give insight to how social and self identity of disability relies in part of the people around you. Comparing the fates of *Frankenstein* to the story of *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio shows how identity can change when disability is perceived and recognized properly.

- 
4. Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Staring: How We Look*, (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2009), 6.
  5. Garland-Thomson, 20.

### ***Frankenstein, the Creation, and Misrecognition***

Written during the genesis of the Victorian freak show, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley continues to be heralded as the first true science fiction novel and as a fundamental monster text in literature studies. The word “monster” appears in *Frankenstein* a total of 33 times, often a derogatory title hurled at the creation of Dr. Victor Frankenstein among other monster monikers like “demon”, “specter”, and “ogre”. As discussed in the introduction, Victor spent numerous hours toiling to make his creation beautiful, but once all of the pieces formed a whole, he began to see monstrosity. Upon staring at the whole of his creation and realizing his mistake, he flees the creation’s presence, seeing a future of evil and destruction in the creation’s visage.

The only physical description provided by Shelley describes the creation’s stretched flesh and near pupil-less eyes.<sup>6</sup> The stretched flesh that shows the muscle and tissue underneath as well as his colorless eyes marks the creation with a visual disfigurement, able to be perceived by others. Though he should have been seen as beautiful, the visual of his atrophic skin and the moving muscles and skeleton underneath were visual markers of what set him apart and defined him as different from the normal living world. Marked from the beginning as other, the creation’s fall began swiftly into misrecognition and the monsterdom that followed him. When Victor first uses the word “monster”, his creation is standing faithfully at his bedside, attempting speech and smiling down at his creator. Victor believes that as his creation reaches out for him, it is to “detain” him and thus absconds to a courtyard to think about the horror he brought upon the world.<sup>7</sup> These two scenes make up the first example of Victor staring at his creation, projecting

---

6. Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein; or, The modern Prometheus*. London, Printed for Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, & Jones, 1818, 51.

7. Shelley, 52.

his horror upon him and misrecognizing him to be a monster. This scene cements one of the creation's first memories as his beloved creator sprinting away from him in fear.

As the creation goes about the novel, people routinely claim him to be a monster, which while the definition of a deformed human might be true, thinking of the other definition sheds more light on the creation's journey. Through the entirety of the novel, the other characters, Victor included, misrecognize the creature as monstrous, that is, a portent of evil. They see in the creature's visual disfiguration an evilness that sets him apart from the others, because one could not be so deformed without containing much evil inside of them. This belief put upon by the ones perceiving him creates a confusion within the creation about his own identity. As stated in the introduction, the theory of recognition assumes that the development of one's identity is reliant upon the response of society. The villagers' misrecognition of the creation as monstrous and evil ends up fashioning him for a life "by misery to vice of hatred", a manifestation of the monstrous ends they projected upon him.<sup>8</sup> Over time as the creation develops speech and rational thought, he is able to understand that the people who perceive him are afraid or angry at his appearance. This in turn creates an internal confusion within him that toils into self-hatred and rage. The creation has no idea what he looks like or why his countenance inspires such drastic emotion from the people around him. But their reactions are constant and consistent, leading him to understand there must be truth in their perception, so there must be truth in their words as well. Iser notes that the act of misrecognition can destroy one's relationship to themselves.<sup>9</sup> Because he is so often misrecognized as a portent of evil, that belief becomes internalized and he ends up becoming the monster that people believe him to be. There is no one, once they perceive

---

8. Shelley, 238.

9. Iser, Mattias, "Recognition", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

him, who does not force their anxieties onto him and leverage their power against him. The creation retains no hope that he can live a life among people and resigns himself to isolation.

When the narrative reaches the point of view of the creation, the reader begins to understand that Victor's biased point-of-view is charged with misconceptions about his creation. Victor assumes that the creation will only bring doom and horror, fulfilling the role of the monster he had created. However, with the creation's point-of-view, the reader understands that even the creation was confused about the villager's repulsions towards him, that is, until he perceives himself in a reflection. During this scene he says, "but how was I terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity."<sup>10</sup> He acknowledges his "deformity" and understands then the revulsion with his countenance, leading him to internalize shame and self-loathing. Garland-Thomson writes that through staring, there is a brief moment of interpersonal connection that allows both the starrer and staree to be known to each other.<sup>11</sup> While there are several moments of this happening between the creation and the villagers before, the creation has a brief moment of intrapersonal connection. It is because of his history of being viewed by Victor and the villagers that he has a false sense of normalcy and he can recognize himself as abnormal. Through this act of viewing himself and being misrecognized prior, he understands that his disability must be because he is truly evil, a monster only capable

---

10. Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The modern Prometheus*, 117.

11. Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look*, 33.

of terrible things. This realization and the hatred of the people around him drives him to isolation, creating a deep loneliness within him. As he continues through the novel, the reader starts to see the shift into internalized hatred and the manifestation of his monstrosity through the murder of several side characters. The creation's monstrous body and later actions pose a threat to the normal bodies of the villagers, a threat that must be contained. Garland-Thomson notes that narratively, the only ways to control the threat of the disabled body are to disempower (through misrecognition) or to kill the disabled body.<sup>12</sup> Even though the creation is remorseful for the violence he has committed, the narrative does not allow him to atone or change his ways, instead deciding that his only fate as a monster could be complete isolation and death. The creation serves as a disabled monolith of the threat that different bodies pose to normalcy, disabled by the people around him and later himself.

The creature being misrecognized as a monster and becoming the victim of staring also gives way to the power of the one viewing him. There is a sort of economy in visual difference, Garland-Thomson notes, that causes the staree to be a spectacle and the starrer to remain sheltered in normalcy.<sup>13</sup> Victor, the first one to see the creation, immediately projects his fears of creation and revulsion with his own actions onto the creation. Garland-Thomson speaks on how the one doing the viewing can project their emotions onto the identity of the person they are viewing, often as a way of regulating their own understanding.<sup>14</sup> Victor is unable to understand what he is looking at and unable to reconcile how his actions led to such a creation. His inability to

---

12. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 36.

13. Garland-Thomson, 8.

14. Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look*, 15.



understand manifests as a fear of the threat that the creation's different body poses to society's sense of normalcy. The creation attempts to achieve mutual recognition, seeing the humanity in the people around him, but they are unable to see the humanity in him. This lack of mutual recognition creates an impasse, meaning that one party has to either die or give up the power.<sup>15</sup> In some cases, the creation breaks this impasse through the killing of the one perceiving him. In most cases, he gives up his autonomous power of being recognized and flees in submission to the emotions projected upon him. The same is true of the villagers themselves. Some of them are filled with fear, unsure of how to process what they are seeing and fleeing as a result. Others are filled with anger at the differences they perceive, attempting to leverage power over the creation as a means of controlling the narrative of how they interact with the creation. Without someone to recognize him for who he is and without anyone who doesn't project their emotions onto him, it is understandable that the creation is driven to isolation in preference to being rejected by everyone he meets.

*Frankenstein* is a textbook definition of what happens when staring does not produce a sense of understanding between starrer and staree. There is no empathy or understanding between the creation and the ones who perceive him, leading to misrecognition of his identity and forcing him into a life of hatred and pain. While in some ways the tale of Dr. Frankenstein focuses on the horror of creation, it also tells a false tale of disability and how it is seen as lesser or something to be hidden. This creates a negative perception of disability that is reflected then in future literature's understanding of disability, and thus, villainizing the identity of disability. Had the creation been able to attain mutual recognition, there might have been a very different ending.

---

15. Iser, Mattias, "Recognition", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

### ***Wonder, Auggie, and Identity***

Written almost two centuries after *Frankenstein*'s publication, *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio is the story of August (Auggie) Pullman, a boy born with Treacher Collins syndrome and hemifacial microsomia. The novel features Auggie in 5th grade, attending a public school for the first time after being homeschooled due to medical surgeries and recovery. Auggie loves space and has a quirk of wearing a space helmet for fun and as a means of hiding his face from others. While he is unable to hide his disability with a helmet as he gets older, Auggie hides his face by looking at the ground and avoiding eye contact with others. Once he starts school, Auggie becomes a victim to the judgement of his classmates, leading to the main plot of Auggie being bullied by Julian, who frequently refers to Auggie with monstrous terminology. The novel is told in the perspective of six different characters, including Auggie, with a focus on how Auggie plays into their lives. Palacio herself has no experience with disability and wrote the novel in response to viewing children with hemifacial microsomia. It is not the best representation of disability, but it is one of the most prominent disability narratives in children's literature.

Auggie lives his life in a perpetual state of misrecognition. Even as a young child, he recognizes himself as the powerless victim of staring, preferring isolation to being seen by others. On Auggie's first day of school, without his helmet to hide him, he purposefully keeps his head down to avoid being seen. Garland-Thomson notes that when people are trying to present themselves, they try to practice an illusion of normalcy despite being different.<sup>16</sup> Auggie tries to hide his face, doing everything he can to be perceived as normal. But when it comes time for introductions in the classroom, Auggie specifically refers to the scene as "like a lamb to the

---

16. Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look*, 45.

slaughter”, referencing his preparation to be seen and verbally humiliated by the rest of the class.<sup>17</sup> While the initial introduction goes well, Julian asks Auggie if his favorite character from Star Wars is Darth Sidious. Auggie is an expert in Star Wars and he knows immediately that Julian asked because the character Darth Sidious gets hit by lightning and “becomes totally deformed.”<sup>18</sup> While the other students are not as outward in their projections of fear and hatred upon Auggie, they often whisper behind his back and avoid talking or touching him because of his disability. His classmate’s perceptions of disability are so poor that in one scene, a character close to Auggie says that if he looked like Auggie, he would “kill [him]self.”<sup>19</sup> Garland-Thomson notes that through the different body, “what you look like, rather than who you are, often determines how people respond to you.”<sup>20</sup> Auggie’s classmates do not give him the chance to show his identity beyond his disability, rendering him completely powerless to their harsh words and staring.

Seeing through Auggie’s eyes, the reader has an understanding that the world views him as monstrous and he internalizes society’s perception of him and believes the same of himself. Knowing how people feel when they look at him, Auggie believes the disgust for his appearance is warranted, referencing himself as “the Beast”<sup>21</sup>, “Ugly”<sup>22</sup>, “freak” and “disgusting.”<sup>23</sup> When people laugh or lash out at him because of his visual disability, it distresses Auggie but he also seems to understand and feel the same way about himself. Auggie’s negative perceptions of

---

17. Palacio, R. J. *Wonder*. (New York, NY: Random House, 2012), 43.

18. Palacio, 44.

19. Palacio, 77.

20. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 34.

21. Palacio, *Wonder*, 56.

22. Palacio, 60.

23. Palacio, 218.

himself run so deep that his favorite holiday is Halloween because he can wear a mask and no one can look at him differently.<sup>24</sup> Auggie's identity and self-perception was shaped by society's negative recognition of his appearance. At such a young age, outside of his family, there were hardly any times that in a moment of recognition, he didn't have to give up his autonomy to the person perceiving him. Auggie falls into the same trap of Frankenstein's creation, molding his personality around the perceptions of others. Instead of lashing out and becoming a monster, Auggie retreats and hides within himself until proper recognition is had.

Auggie has to battle against the narratives that he hears from his classmates and their desire to set him apart from the rest of them. However, through new friends and family, Auggie is able to receive proper recognition, changing his identity and allowing him to stand the challenge of staring and move forward with his life. His new friends Summer and Jack help to show him that not all kids fear him and they support Auggie in pursuing his passion for science. As Auggie builds on these friendships, he starts to open up his hidden self and reveal more of his personality to the school. Finally supported by others, by the end of the novel Auggie no longer hides his disabilities and shows his classmates that he will not allow them to isolate him and make fun of him. While at the beginning of the book he actively attempts to hide himself from others, by the end of the book he is looking people in the eye constantly and standing up for himself. When he begins to be verbally and physically attacked on a camp retreat, Auggie knows that the boys are targeting him but refuses to leave his friend behind, even at the expense of his well-being.<sup>25</sup> In one of the final scenes, Auggie receives an award during his graduation ceremony and during the reception everyone is taking photos of him, despite his aversion to his

---

24. Palacio, 73.

25. Palacio, 266.

picture being taken, stated in “School Pictures.”<sup>26</sup> He says, “for the first time I can remember, I wasn’t even thinking about my face. I was just smiling...”<sup>27</sup> While he spent the whole novel worried about how people would look at his face and berate him, by the end of the novel, he no longer cedes power and autonomy to the people who stare at him. Auggie becomes unapologetically himself, and he understands that it isn’t his concern to worry about what other people think. It is his only concern to worry about himself and doing the things he loves to do.

Thinking again to the power that people have when perceiving others, it is interesting to note where all the hatred in the novel stems from. The bulk of the misrecognition comes from Julian and the people he speaks to, spreading a false narrative about Auggie to exert power over him. In *Auggie & Me*, published several years after the novel, it is revealed that Julian hated Auggie’s appearance because Auggie was similar to the monsters that haunted Julian’s dreams for years.<sup>28</sup> Seeing a physical representation of his nightmares filled Julian with fear, which he then turned to hatred so that he could push away his fear and gain power over it. Threatened by the disabled body of Auggie, Julian lashed out with harsh words and bullying tactics. Julian was unable to separate his dreams from what he was seeing in reality, which led him to do anything within his power to get Auggie away from him. Auggie didn’t know any better and the other kids at the school loved Julian, so Auggie felt forced to cede his power to Julian’s narrative. All along, Julian is trying to grasp a sense of normalcy within this new relationship to Auggie. But instead of leveling his connection with Auggie and trying to practice empathy, the threat of Auggie’s disfigurement was too great and caused Julian to leverage power over Auggie.

---

26. Palacio, 70.

27. Palacio, 307.

28. Palacio, R.J., *Auggie & Me*, (New York, NY: Random House, 2014).

*Wonder* shows the journey of identity and how perception can allow identity to change when one is recognized for who they truly are. As people start to see the other identities of Auggie, child, brainiac, comedian, the ones perceiving him begin to overcome the fears and disgust that they projected upon Auggie. His family repeatedly told him that there was nothing wrong with him and that the issue lay with the people who looked at him. Even still, Auggie was unable to move past the narratives of the people in society. Iser notes that even if the one being perceived knows the misrecognition is unjustified, they can still be humiliated and internalize self hatred, leading to a loss of self-control and agency.<sup>29</sup> It takes him almost 75% through the book before Auggie really starts to be recognized properly and change the narrative within himself. Auggie begins to see more love within himself, and as the other people around him start to see his other identities, he sheds the conception of being a freak that had been instilled upon him from society. Auggie no longer hides his face and people are able to perceive him as both disabled and whole, as the whole child that he is.

### **Conclusion**

Recognition theory proves that identity is shaped by the perception of the people around you. Through staring, the starrer has the ability to recognize the staree and reach a mutual recognition that puts both of them on a level power field. If the stakes tilt into misrecognition because the starrer is unable to make sense of what they are seeing or they project their emotions onto the staree, it can force a wedge into the identity of the staree. Throughout *Frankenstein*, the creation's loss of autonomy and rise of self-hatred led to a manifestation of the monster he had been misrecognized as. His identity was forever shaped in the monstrous words from the people

---

29. Iser, Mattias, "Recognition", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

around him, leading to his ultimate death from lack of recognition. In *Wonder*, Auggie's loss of identity was changed through proper recognition in cases where he reached mutual recognition and was able to be understood by the people perceiving him. Gaining proper recognition is vital to the preservation of one's identity, as evidenced in the contrasting fates of these two novels. Without recognition and understanding, society runs the risk of creating false identities for people of marginalization. But there is hope in the perception of others and the cycle of recognition. Hope that if both the starrer and staree reach mutual understanding and recognition, identities can be shared freely instead of hidden away and lost to time.

## Bibliography

- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability In American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, <https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.library.wvu.edu/2027/heb.02826>. EPUB.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Staring: How We Look*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2009. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/wvu/detail.action?docID=430868>.
- Iser, Mattias. "Recognition", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition). Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/recognition/>.
- Palacio, R. J. *Auggie & Me*. New York, NY: Random House, 2014.
- Palacio, R. J. *Wonder*. New York, NY: Random House, 2012.
- Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein; or, The modern Prometheus* . London, Printed for Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, & Jones, 1818.