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The Intricate Mind of an Imprisoned Spirit

The institution of slavery has been portrayed in a variety of lights and forms throughout the history of human existence. The linkage between the slave class and a certain race is a modern concept, but one that feels inextricably inseparable. However, in the ancient, Medieval, and modern worlds, the notion of slavery encapsulates a far broader meaning than one based on skin color. Furthermore, the people in servitude were often subjects of character and plot development as well as psychological examination. His work *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Enlightenment thinker Hegel questions what makes a slave in society and what slaves experience that masters do not. The Roman playwright Plautus repeatedly represents slaves as clever; they solve the mystery of the narrative when no other character can. Mary Shelley's creature in *Frankenstein*, a slave to his creator, utilizes the path to self consciousness that Hegel describes and the cleverness that Plautus continuously returns to, indicating that the self actualization of slaves surpasses that of their masters and transcends time periods.

Hegel provides an elaborate process of actualization that slaves undergo as they seek meaning for their existence. Deemed the master-slave dialectic, Hegel uses the metaphor of a slave-master relationship to explain the human need for self recognition and consciousness. "Servitude is self-consciousness, and thus what it is in and for itself is now up for examination. For servitude, the master is initially the essence" (Hegel 5). In being bound to another human in

servitude, the slave recognizes himself through the acknowledgement of their master. Fear is also essential to the development of the slave; the slave's life is often in the hands of someone who has full authority to kill them, and therefore they feel the fear of death far more intensely than the master. The slave is forced into a state of self-realization of their own mortality, which then translates into the development of their self-consciousness.

Plautus has a more comedic definition of what constitutes an acceptable slave-master relationship. The ancient playwright includes the "clever slave" motif in many of his theatrical works. This plot device involves an active slave character who solves a problem that the other characters do not, while simultaneously acting obedient and subservient to their masters. In the play "The Brothers Menaechmus," the slave Messenio determines that the mix-ups occurring in the town are due to the twin brothers who were separated at birth being mistaken for one another.

MESSENIUS: Didn't I predict all this? Why, these are only falling leaves (Plautus 92).

Messenio is just one of Plautus's many slave characters that clears up confusion and brings resolution. While the concept of the "clever slave" was not invented by Plautus and taken from classical Greek comedy, it was a motif that he heightened and put at the forefront of his writing. The slave outsmarts the wealthier and more educated characters and displays a quality that the master did not realize the slave possessed.

While the creature in *Frankenstein* is not a typical slave in that he produces anything for his master, he is eternally bonded to Dr. Victor Frankenstein for giving him life, and therefore Victor is the only living being who truly understands the him and can give him recognition. According to Hegel, every living being desires to be recognized as a consciousness, and often

two beings confront one another in a struggle for recognition (Hegel 3). If the struggle is unequal, one consciousness becomes the slave and one the master. In *Frankenstein*, Victor has the power of knowledge and status to scientifically give birth to an entirely new species, but his fear of what he has created consequently sends the creature into exile. However, the creature longs to understand himself in an intellectual way, and the only person who understands the inner workings of the creature is Dr. Frankenstein. Therefore the creature must pursue the doctor for acknowledgement as a self consciousness in order to be a whole being.

The self-actualizing process that Hegel describes manifests within Dr. Frankenstein's creature, especially when he reads about humankind. In his description of what constitutes slave morality, Hegel explicates what issues concern a slave's consciousness, and he states that the slave contemplates the simple essence of being. "This consciousness was not driven with anxiety about just this or that matter, nor did it have anxiety about just this or that moment; rather, it had anxiety about its entire essence" (Hegel 5). This intense concern and curiosity from the slave about its own sentience is exactly what the creature in *Frankenstein* exhibits, and he attempts to satisfy his thirst for knowledge by reading literature about the human race in books he finds in the woods. "I can hardly describe to you the effect of these books. They produced in me an infinity of new images and feelings, that sometimes raised me to ecstasy, but more frequently sunk me into the lowest dejection" (Shelley 137-8). The power of literacy that the creature acquires is both an advantage and a curse; the words he reads in *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch's *Lives*, and the *Sorrows of Werter* make him further detest himself. "My person was hideous and my stature gigantic. What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them" (Shelley

138). The creature's desire to excavate his own genealogy through deeper self consciousness both empowers and destroys him.

In order to attain the recognition he desires, the creature gains the cleverness that Plautus represents in his slave characters in order to manipulate Dr. Frankenstein and reverse the master-slave roles altogether. The creature realizes that he has the power of physical strength over Dr. Frankenstein, and he attains enough cunning to threaten the doctor into doing what he desires; in this case, the creature wants the doctor to create a companion for him of the same species, or else he will kill the doctor's loved ones and eventually kill the doctor himself. "Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master;—obey!" (Shelley 181). The creature's cleverness allows him to reach his ultimate goal; not only freedom from his master, but power over the one who previously oppressed him. None of Plautus's slaves achieve this status, however Strobilus in "The Pot of Gold" gains temporary economic power over his master by skillfully stealing the pot of gold.

STROBILUS: Triumph. Joy and jubilation are showered on me from the gods.

Now I own a four-pound pot of gold. What man on earth is richer?

No one in the whole of Athens has been blessed by heaven more. (Plautus 222)

While the fragmented end of the play suggests that Strobilus eventually gives the fortune back to his master, he nevertheless had leverage over his lord for a short time, and this sharpness allows both Strobilus and Frankenstein's creature to become the master.

The role reversal that occurs between the creature and Dr. Frankenstein can also be represented in Hegel's master-slave dialectic; the master becomes dependent upon what the slave produces, and therefore the slave has power over the master. In a rather winding paragraph of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel states that the slave produces a thing using its labor, and the master consumes that thing, and therefore the slave stands in between the master and that thing. The master is then dependent upon the slave for both the production of the thing as well as for the recognition from the slave that they are the master (Hegel 4). Thus, not only can the slave be a more self actualized being, but the slave can potentially choose to terminate its labor and subject the master into subservience.

Once Dr. Frankenstein is placed in the position of servitude to his creature, he reaches a type of self consciousness through the process of fear that Hegel describes. A huge aspect of enslavement that Hegel expounds on is fear of both the master and of death. Once the roles of slave and master are reversed, the creature places the doctor in a position of fear for his own wellbeing and that of his family, who the creature threatens to kill. "I had now neglected my promise for some time, and I feared the effects of the demon's disappointment. He might remain in Switzerland and wreak his vengeance on my relatives" (Shelley 175). The fear that Victor experiences invades his every move and positions him at the mercy of his now-master, the creature. "I waited for my letters with feverish impatience; if they were delayed I was miserable and overcome by a thousand fears" (Shelley 175). The creature's threat of emotional torture and death forces Victor into a reckoning that Hegel claims all slaves endure. "It felt the fear of death, the absolute master. In that feeling, it had inwardly fallen into dissolution, trembled in its depths,

and all that was fixed within it had been shaken loose” (Hegel 5). While Victor is not physically bound to slavery, he is psychologically enslaved to the creature until he abides by his wishes.

In applying this mode of thought about slavery to reality, one could take these claims about slaves’ enhanced self consciousness to mean that the enslavement of human beings is justified. However, neither Hegel nor I make the argument that the self consciousness a slave experiences is one that is ideal or fulfilling. Writer and Harvard College Professor Jill Lepore wrote a piece in *the New Yorker* magazine titled “The Strange and Twisted Life of ‘Frankenstein’” in which she analyzes Mary Shelley’s story in a contemporary context. Among her acute critique, she likens the creature’s road to self discovery through literature with the process African American slave Frederick Douglass describes in his autobiography.

“I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing,” Douglass wrote. “It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy.” So, too, the creature: “Increase of knowledge only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast I was.” Douglass: “I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead.” The creature: “Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live?” Douglass seeks his escape; the creature seeks his revenge. (Lepore)

Both these slaves discover the paradox and torture in learning about their social position through the words of their oppressors. The self awareness that Hegel articulates is a process that raises the slave above their master in the level of consciousness, but it is also a double-edged sword, and one that should not be envied or romanticized.

By tracking the slave narratives that are outlined by Plautus, Hegel, and Shelley, one can observe the parallels between how slaves are defined and their various processes of discovering self consciousness over time. This evolution of self reflection is unique to people who are born into servitude and forced to confront their fragile existence; however, this relationship can flip in a change of circumstance. As shown in the example of Frederick Douglass, the awareness of existing as a slave is a blessing and a curse; to give suffering a name only alleviates a portion of the pain it causes. Only does the reader of Shelley's novel begin to sympathize with the creature when they hear the creature's narrative from his point of view; until then, the only knowledge the reader receives about the creature is his capacity to kill. It is far too easy to subordinate someone who we do not consider human, but once they become an entity worthy of sympathy, trust, and love, their dehumanization is renounced. If slaves much like Frederick Douglass were acknowledged as individuals capable of the wit of Plautus's servants and the desire to learn like Shelley's creature, perhaps the eternal stain of slavery would never have tarnished the biography of the United States.

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