

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein - The Individual and Society

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Frankenstein: The Individual and Society

The creature's ambiguous humanity has long puzzled readers of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In this essay I will focus on how *Frankenstein* can be used to explore two philosophical topics, social contract theory, and gender roles, in light of ideas from Shelley's two philosophical parents, William Godwin, and [Mary Wollstonecraft](#).

What Does it Mean to be Human? [Individual](#) and Society

One historically important tradition in social and political philosophy is called "Social Contract Theory." It gives a way of thinking about what it means to be human, raising fundamental questions such as: what is human nature, in itself, apart from society? Are people fundamentally equal, and if so, why, in what ways? What justifies governmental authority? In what sense are people free and independent if their lives are ruled by laws and governmental authorities?

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), and [John Locke](#) (1632-1704), were English philosophers who approached these questions by hypothesizing a "state of nature." Try to imagine what a person would be like if he or she lived outside of any governed society. Hobbes thought that people would be isolated, desperately afraid of harm from others. Life would be, in Hobbes' memorable phrase, "poore, solitary, nasty, brutish and short." Locke wasn't quite so pessimistic. He thought that in the state of nature, people would be fairly sociable, and would establish private property and trade. Both Hobbes and Locke thought that insecurity in the state of nature would lead people to join together and give to a governmental authority the right to make laws and punish offenders. Hence, for them, government is based on a "social contrac...

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...manly virtues are, in fact, weaknesses. Wollstonecraft insists, "The most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart....It is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason" (103). When women are socialized to be feminine, when their reasoning powers are not developed, and when they have no option but to be economically dependent on men, their characters will become perverted, and they will become servile or manipulative.

Works Cited:

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