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*Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil? I shan't tell my reasons for making this inquiry; but I beseech you to explain, if you can, what I have married—that is, when you call to see me; and you must call, Ellen, very soon. Don't write, but come, and bring me something from Edgar.*

—Wuthering Heights

*Old man! there is no power in holy men,  
Nor charm in prayer, nor purifying form  
Of penitence, nor outward look, nor fast,  
Nor agony, nor, greater than all these,  
The innate tortures of that deep despair  
Which is remorse without the fear of hell*

—Manfred, A Dramatic Poem

### Fictional Villains (Final Exam Question 1)

One of the most interesting aspects of this excursion into Gothic literature has been learning about fictional (male) characters who are sometimes the epitome of evil. (I am also interested that I study real-life people and events—that are often far worse than fictional representations—and do not have the same emotional response that triggers a kind of disengagement.)

*Wuthering Heights*'s Heathcliff is one of, if not *the*, most villainous characters I have ever met. He demands near absolute control and hurts others without thought. He assumes a God-like power. Alive and dead, he haunts those around him in very real, metaphorical, and/or supernatural ways. He is the very embodiment of toxic male masculinity (and the urgent need for

messages that masculinity can be positive). He has *too much* of a sense of self and virtually no sense of family or of community.

Heathcliff is so hateful and damaging that it is almost a stretch to point toward hints of a better self somewhere within Heathcliff. He does not just throw Lockwood out. He does not go on a murder spree. He *does* allow others to talk sometimes to a limited extent. And, yet, given Catherine's love for him and her "I am Heathcliff" speech, there might be more promising sides to Heathcliff that exist beyond the page. Heathcliff is always an outsider given his adoption and given the lack of a backstory, we should also acknowledge the trauma he inevitably feels *or at least felt*.

On the other hand, as part of its Gothic-ness, *Wuthering Heights* only gives readers minimal information about the mores of its world—in other words, Heathcliff and terrorism from patriarchs is not necessarily an anomaly. Further, he is an artistic representation, not a real person, and his character gives us opportunities to think about why people are the way they are—how they are created and re-created in response to those they encounter. Emphasizing that Heathcliff is male is important, too, as women could just as easily fill the role of villainous character.

Like Heathcliff, Manfred in *Manfred, A Dramatic Poem* is also aggressive and domineering. He is also perpetually lovesick and longing for a past that cannot be reinstated. But Manfred kind of accepts that he and the spirits are not all powerful. Indeed, there are people/beings as powerful or more powerful than him, such as the witch who offers assistance in exchange for his enslavement. Manfred does not constantly delight in harming others. He has brief moments of happiness, such as when he sees Astarte again and before realizing she is just a ghost. Manfred tries different things in order to get what he wants. He is able and willing to

articulate some of his pain—a powerful kind of positive masculinity/humanity. Further, Manfred does not attempt to bring everyone else down with him—he is rude and insulting sometimes, such as when he calls for the priest but ridicules offers of prayer—but is more narrowly-focused.

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*Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself.*

—The Picture of Dorian Gray

*Dorian, Dorian...before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought that it was all true....You can—oh, my beautiful love!—and you freed my soul from prison.*

—The Picture of Dorian Gray

*Be calm! I entreat you to hear me, before you give vent to your hatred on my devoted head. Have I not suffered enough, that you seek to increase my misery? Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it. Remember, thou hast made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine; my joints more supple. But I will not be tempted to set myself in opposition to thee. I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king, if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owest me.*

—Frankenstein

#### Creation Never Stops; or, Art Finds Usefulness (Final Exam Question 2)

Those who are creators have significant power over that which they create. The created—be it persons, friendships, monsters, books, or theatre performances—have control over the creator, too. Depending on the theism(s) of those involved and their sociopolitical contexts, this control might have varying levels of religiosity. But I caution against any capital “C” “Creator” because of its essentialism and its implied lack of agency for the created *and* the creator. A

capital “C” “Creator” also implies that the creator has sustained obligations to the created. Both parties are often capable of destroying the other and both can break the link at any time.

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* both grapple with such questions and topics. But neither author, nor their stories, explicitly engage with religion. If anything, they approach these sensitive topics—morality, life, death, power, science—without the constant codes and layers associated with theism(s). Both novels provide opportunities to explore expanded notions of “creator” and to look at “creation” as occurring on spectrums and being an on-going hermeneutical-like process. While the exam prompt associates *Frankenstein* with Romanticism (individuals and emotions) and *Picture* with Aestheticism (“art for art’s sake”), both narratives shred then-prevailing expectations about what stories and their characters can do. Both authors also place their works in the long trajectory of (basically) non-theistic philosophy. In a kind of proto-magical realism, both works effectively give life to new materials—be it human remains or be it a canvas and a book, for example—and allow us to see the life and creation-ness in everything.

In *Frankenstein* there are two explicit, core creations. Mary Shelley created the book, of course. And in very real ways, given hermeneutics and given the literary present tense, this book is recreated and recreated and recreated into perpetuity. Additionally, in *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein creates his monster—although he creates him from parts created by others and by using knowledge created and adapted from others.

There is also the creation of Victor within the world of the book to consider—he had been conceived at some point and later born. Further, *Frankenstein* shows Victor being recreated and recreated as he seeks education, builds his creature, and sees the aftermath of his monster. The process of creation and re-creation is constantly reciprocal: Education shapes Victor, Victor

shapes old parts, and these old parts re-shape him into a depressed and fearing being who dies. We could also look at the friendship he had created and then re-creates with Henry Clerval, for example. Creation is always—in some way or another, even with just a book—a collaborative process.

And while talking about “creations,” we should at least look at its opposite—extinctions or destructions. For example, Victor’s monster kills three people and Victor “kills” the being he is making at the request of his creature.

In *Picture*, Dorian Gray creates inspiration in Basil Hallward and in Lord Henry, Basil creates a portrait of Dorian Gray, Lord Henry’s favorite book creates a (new) Dorian Gray who is thoughtless and evil, and Dorian Gray—because of his wish—constantly (re)creates and gradually destroys—the portrait until the end when its recreated with Dorian Gray’s final destruction.

Digging further and thinking about Basil’s portrait of Dorian Gray, we can think about several things: the genes and the social constructions that deem, construct, and create the conditions for Dorian Gray to be deemed beautiful; the materials used to create the paint and the canvas used to create the portrait of Dorian Gray; the social mores and leisure time that created the value in even having paintings; and the arrogance that can come with creation (“to a large extent the lad was his own creation”).

*Picture* also makes interesting observations about theatre, specially about whether performers in a play create anything (or at least, create anything *real*) and if they can have/create an independent existence outside of the theater. (I am using *theatre* and *theater* deliberately with the former referring to the art and ideas and the latter referring to the building.)

Both works call into question any notion of “artificiality” with its definition of “the quality of being made or produced by human beings rather than occurring naturally.” By a strict definition, both *Frankenstein* and *Picture* are artificial—such a classification miss the entire point of the works. In contrast, both works expand what is natural and show that *everything* is natural, including that made and shaped by humans, because it all comes from the (natural) Earth.