

# Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing

---

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 3

---

September 2017

## Selfishness: The Basis of Conflict

Lilly M. Barnett  
*University of Dayton*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Barnett, Lilly M. (2017) "Selfishness: The Basis of Conflict," *Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl/vol4/iss1/3>

This Response or Comment is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing* by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlangen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlangen1@udayton.edu).

---

## Selfishness: The Basis of Conflict

### **Writing Process**

For this essay, we were prompted to discuss themes and characters of *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and how those related to John Paul II's ideals of the common good. After careful consideration and research, I came to the understanding that characters *Frankenstein* were not particularly working toward the common good and therefore revolved my paper around that and supporting facts from Shelley. I also incorporate supporting details from Rebecca Solnit's *Ice*.

### **Course**

ENG100

### **Semester**

Spring

### **Instructor**

Prof. Marianne Raab

### **Year**

2017

Lilly Barnett

ENG 100

Prof. Marianne Raab

Spring 2017

### Selfishness: The Basis of Conflict

In Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein* there is an overpowering sense of selfishness amongst the leading characters. The narrow-minded focus in which Captain Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the monster are concerned with themselves seems to be the root of conflict within the story. Perhaps the selfish tendencies of these characters reflect moments Shelley faced in her life. Shelley's mother passed away after giving birth to Shelley, leaving her motherless. Not only did Shelley grow up without a mother to depend on, she also felt responsible for her mother's death. However, when Shelley was five her father remarried. Though it appeared, "...Mrs. Godwin was a good mother and took sufficient bodily care of her stepchildren," Shelley often conflicted with her ("A Biographical Sketch of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley"). Mrs. Godwin often denied Shelley's creativity and intelligence, causing Shelley to resent her stepmother. Shelley and Mrs. Godwin lacked the mother-daughter connection that Shelley longed for. Shelley also believed Mrs. Godwin to be alienating her from her father. The continual disagreement between Shelley and her stepmother "had come to such a head that William Godwin sent Mary to board with an acquaintance, William Baxter, and his family in Dundee for several months" ("A Biographical Sketch of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley"). Ultimately, Mrs. Godwin's selfishness and inability to accept Shelley leads her away from her own home and father ("A Biographical Sketch of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley").

Pope John Paul II's concept of the common good is an initiative to create an opportunistic environment in which everyone assists others in achieving their goals. The common good stems from the idea that the participation of every person is necessary in order to achieve an uplifting and positive atmosphere. The common good provides "dignity, unity and equality of all people" therefore allowing equal opportunities for each person (Paul II Section 164). In addition, "The common good... involves all members of society, no one is exempt from cooperating" (Paul II Section 167). Another component of this idea is to take responsibility for one's actions and creations and understanding how they will impact another person. At the University of Dayton, "A concern for the common good leads us to make choices... in light of how these choices affect other people and the community as a whole" ("Solidarity and the Common Good"). Overall, the common good can be achieved if every person is willing to uplift themselves and those around them (Paul II).

The idea of the common good is prevalent in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but is illuminated in the way the characters work against it. In fact, characters often go against John Paul II's ideals. The selfishness Shelley encountered in her life influences the self-centeredness of the characters. The self-involvement of the characters is often what leads to the obstacles they face. Mrs. Godwin's selfishness and disinterest in Shelley's wellbeing leads to conflict in Shelley's life just as the selfishness of the characters in *Frankenstein* causes tragedy within the novel. The characters make decisions in their own interest, ignoring the (often negative) effect it may have on others. Captain Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the monster embody the recurring theme of selfishness and in this way, magnify concepts related to the common good by disregarding the wellbeing of others.

Beginning with the opening letters Captain Walton sends to his sister, there is evidence of Walton's self-interest. Walton has an undeniable desire to succeed in the voyage, yet he does so in a way that disregards the wellbeing of his crew. Walton values his voyage more than the lives of those helping him. In a letter, Walton reassures his sister to "not be alarmed for my safety" and neglects to mention the other men whose safety is at risk (Shelley 13). Though Walton may be willing to risk his own life for his voyage and discoveries, he is incredibly selfish to endanger the lives of others for his personal gain. This is also prevalent towards the end of the story as the crew approaches dangerous conditions. Walton expresses, "I had rather die, than return shamefully – my purpose unfulfilled" (Shelley 143). Walton's determination is admirable, but he is failing to protect his men. It is unfathomable how Walton is willing to risk the lives of those running his ship in order to advance in his journey.

Given Walton's tone toward his crew, it is not surprising that he may not see their lives as valuable as his own. Though he claims to have an immense appreciation for them, he also discredits their intelligence and ability. Walton expresses his loneliness in a letter to his sister stating, "I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a spacious mind, whose tastes are like my own, to approve or amend my plans" (Shelley 11). He is surrounded by men, but Walton places himself above them. It seems as if he refuses to befriend them because they work for him. For example, he describes his lieutenant as "a man of wonderful courage and enterprise" yet dismisses him as a friend (Shelley 12). In a sense, Walton only sees his crew as a useful tool to complete his voyage. It is not until Victor Frankenstein joins the voyage that Walton finds somebody to relate to.

In addition to Captain Walton, Victor Frankenstein also has a primary concern for himself and a disregard for others. Beginning with his initial creation of the monster,

Frankenstein refuses to take ownership of it. Rebecca Solnit explains, “Frankenstein imagines himself as a savior. But when he brings his creature to life and then flees it, he is... a citizen walking away from a calamity in the making” (45). Frankenstein runs from his mistakes, making them more difficult to solve. Throughout the story, Frankenstein comes to terms with his reality, but refuses to reveal it to anyone for fear of judgement. Frankenstein “knew that if any other had communicated such a relation to [him], [he] should have looked upon it as the ravings of insanity” (Shelley 47). Although he refuses to admit it, he also risks losing one of the most important things to him, his credibility. Frankenstein leaves home in order to learn and has spent years making a name for himself. After the creation of his monster, Frankenstein immediately destroys all aspects of credibility. Frankenstein’s egocentric point of view and fear of losing credibility leads him to risk the lives of his loved ones.

Victor Frankenstein is so concerned with protecting himself that he is putting his family in danger, as well. According to Solnit, Frankenstein’s “...moral weakness, his irresponsibility, is what sets everything in motion” (51). If Frankenstein revealed the truth about his monster from the beginning, his family would be saved from the heartbreaking deaths of Justine, Henry Clervall, and Elizabeth. Justine’s innocence for the murder of William could be proven by Frankenstein’s confession. Frankenstein describes Justine as “... a girl of merit, and possessed qualities which promised to render her life happy...”, yet he is not willing to lose his credibility to allow her to fulfill this happy life (Shelley 49). Afterwards, Frankenstein possesses the audacity to envy Justine stating, “Justine died; she rested; and I was alive” (Shelley 59). Frankenstein only acknowledges that Justine is at peace, not that he is responsible for her execution. Secondly, Frankenstein refuses to create a companion for the monster due to the emotional toll it puts on himself. However, this decision ultimately leads to the deaths of Henry

and Elizabeth. Frankenstein never attempts to protect or inform Elizabeth of their peril. Frankenstein refers to the day of the wedding as “the day that was to fulfil my wishes and my destiny...” (Shelley 128). He never considers the potential physical or emotional harm his newlywed may face. Essentially, he avoids the subject until he is left with nothing. Victor Frankenstein’s lack of forethought for others’ wellbeing leads to loss for himself and the ones he loves. Frankenstein’s selfishness and disinterest in his creation leads his monster to begin inheriting these qualities.

Throughout the novel, Frankenstein’s monster suggests a lack of sympathy for his actions. He also finds his actions justified, therefore seeing nothing wrong with them. The monster murders William for revenge on Frankenstein, who wronged him first by abandoning him. Therefore, the monster believes it to be fair. He explains, “My daily vows rose for revenge – a deep and deadly revenge, such as would alone compensate for the outrages and anguish I had endured” (Shelley 92). The monster refuses to exist without everything he wants and this results in violence. Perhaps the most chilling moment in which the monster’s lack of sympathy is evident is after the murder of Elizabeth. Victor sees his creation, “A grin was on the face of the monster; he seemed to jeer, as with his fiendish finger he pointed towards the corpse of my wife” (Shelley 131). He does not acknowledge the pressure or torment he has put Frankenstein through. The monster sees revenge as the only option in dealing with his pain, leading him to make selfish decisions that cruelly impact others.

The monster’s jealousy also causes him to feel entitled. The monster sees the lives that the cottagers lead and demands to live the same lifestyle. The creature’s only perception of humanity is through the “small and almost imperceptible chink, through which the eye could just penetrate” (Shelley 70). His skewed perception of the world leads him to view himself as a part

of the cottagers' family, though they are unaware of him. He assumes it is his right to have a companion as well as a normal life. After confronting Frankenstein and sharing his story, he requests a female companion. The monster expresses to Frankenstein, "Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind. If you will comply with my conditions, I will leave them and you at peace..." (Shelley 64). Frankenstein uses these threats to raise fear and receive the outcome he desires. Though he is not a human, the monster still desires the experiences of one.

While Shelley was incredibly successful in her career, she did face many hardships throughout her life. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the selfishness of the characters and their destruction was an opportunity for Shelley to reflect her stepmother's selfishness and the internal destruction it caused her to face. In her novel *Frankenstein*, Captain Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the monster do not exhibit qualities that contribute to the common good, due to their selfishness. Though they show moments of regret for others, they show no attempt to assist anyone but themselves. Quite often, their regret for their actions is only due to the positions they put themselves in. These three characters became so narrow-minded in protecting themselves that it eventually created more situations to cope with. Perhaps if their primary concern from the beginning was the safety of others, their conflicts would never have risen.

An innate characteristic of humans is selfishness so it is not unusual that these characters possess this quality. Even the monster, who is not human, gains an immense self-concern due to the other characters' selfishness and how these acts reflect upon him. Shelley uses her novel *Frankenstein* to show modern readers the balance between love for self and love for others. A love and concern for oneself is an integral component of the common good, but at what point does it become detrimental to achieving it?



### Works Cited

“A Biographical Sketch of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley.” The Victorian Web. 2015. Web.

Paul II, John. “The Principle of the Common Good.” *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. 1991. Web.

“Solidarity and the Common Good.” *Principles of Community Living*. University of Dayton, Ohio. Web.

Solnit, Rebecca. “Ice.” *The Faraway Nearby*. 2013. Print.

Wollstonecraft Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*. Wisehouse Classics, 1818. Print.