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English 252: Introduction to Literary Studies

**The Disability Desire Dilemma: A (Psycho)analysis of Margaret Atwood's "Lusus Naturae"**

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“Monstrosity” as it is understood in a human society is typically associated with physical disfigurement, eccentric mannerisms, and inhuman qualities that all aid in the ostracism of the “monster” by those who represent a perfect mold of “human”. This perfect “human” is comfortably positioned within the social matrix -- they have no debilitating physical ailments, their sentient urges are deemed adequate instead of unacceptable, and they have been nurtured by others in the past. Monstrosity and disability are construed to be nearly synonymous in an able-bodied person’s perception of the world. Both equate to the recognition of an entity that is less-than-perfect, and both are seen as a threatening stain to the existence of humanity. Nevertheless, natural human urges that may present themselves for the “monsters” might be scrutinized or disregarded altogether. Margaret Atwood’s “Lusus Naturae” explores what it means to live with disability and without love, and have one’s emotions (particularly one’s psychosexual urges) invalidated because of the disability. Moreover, the forbiddance of urges by others and the consequences of this denial hinge on Freudian psychoanalytic theory, specifically through Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as referenced by Jessica Hale in her critical analysis of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. I had noted some interesting parallels between in “Lusus Naturae” and *Frankenstein*, and I am attempting to draw the connection between the psychosexual nature of the monster’s actions, as well as those of the *lusus naturae*. Jessica Hale asserts that Mary Shelley “...overtly links death and romantic love, death and procreation, and

death and the erotic.” (Hale, 15). Though this claim is mostly centered around the notion of death and its psychosexual implications, some of the points in Hale’s essay regarding the nature of the monster’s sexually-charged deeds are applicable to the protagonist’s expression of self in “Lusus Naturae”. In situating the *lusus naturae* within the context of disability and psychoanalytic theory, I posit that the *lusus naturae*’s misdeeds spawn from continuous social isolation and lack of sexual education as a result of being disabled, and are merely consequences of such factors. I read the *lusus naturae* to be an entity that is deprived of what is quintessential to human functioning, as well as a physical manifestation of the latent, taboo, and unspoken desires of the disabled. Moreover, the *lusus naturae* in a corporeal sense fails to resist the oppressive narratives as imposed by the social world. At the same time, however, she successfully resists this narrative -- choosing to “elevate herself” above her peers through her rejection of the physical world with the embrace of death.

The making of the pariah by the authority -- the authority being the family, the doctor and the priest -- functions as a vehicle for ableism and subsequent psychosexual deprivation. This is initially accomplished through exclusion of the *lusus naturae* in conversation. Her “otherness” is placed on display for the family to discuss at dinnertime, without the acknowledgment of her presence -- ““She was such a lovely baby,’ [her] mother would say. ‘There was nothing wrong with her.’ It saddened her to have given birth to an item such as myself: it was like a reproach, a judgment.” (Atwood, 1). The protagonist narrator’s name is never mentioned -- we are to refer to her as a “*lusus naturae*”, a freak of nature -- as coined by the doctor. She has no friends, aside from the household cat -- “ He was the only living creature who wanted to be close to me. I smelled of blood, old dried up blood: perhaps that was why he shadowed me, why he would

climb up onto me and start licking.” (3). This self-awareness is signified by a need for touch -- the diction employed is sense-oriented and sexually-charged, with emphasis being placed on smell and touch, and taste. The psychosexual nature of affection, which she fails to receive from her father, is initiated through her learning how to read. She “...no longer nestled into the crook of his arm, however. [Her father] sat [her] on the other side of the table. Though this enforced distance pained [her], [she] could see his point.” (2). This event marks the onset of her sexual deprivation, enforces the disability-desire taboo, and contributes to her eventual demise.

Within the precepts of psychoanalytic theory, psychosexual development begins with the parents. The analogous counterpart to the male Oedipus complex is the female Electra complex, in which a young girl tries to compete with her mother for possession of the girl’s father. The girl later engages in “identification” with her mother in an attempt to resolve the conflict, thereby subsiding tensions. Given the complete elimination of sensory pleasure by the father, however, (not being able to sit on his lap under his arm) the *lulus naturae* is starved for affection. She is further interpellated in society, beheld as an object of disability, when her sister remarks, “‘Curse or disease, it doesn’t matter,’... ‘Either way, no one will marry me if they find out.’” (3). Doomed to a life of chastity, the *lulus naturae* acknowledges that “Without [herself], [the sister’s] coast would be clear.” (3). It is important to note, however, that this longing is never manifested nor made conscious -- until her act of innocent sexual violence. The idea of the subconscious mind is exclusively Freudian, drawing on a person’s sexual desires that are left uncovered by the rational mind. The subconscious may make itself seen through Freudian slips, dreams and fantasy -- the latter only emerging when there is opportunity to act it out. These elements are masked by shame -- a learned shame, constructed by society -- and the superego -- the mind’s own moralizing

force. The social proponent of this shame -- the priest -- even hails the *lusus naturae* as beautifully virginal, unfazed by the sexual impurity known to all mankind, given her condition -- “He told me God had chosen me as a special girl, a sort of bride, you might say. He said I was called on to make sacrifices. He said my sufferings would purify my soul. He said I was lucky, because I would stay innocent all my life, no man would want to pollute me, and then I would go straight to Heaven.” (3). Dressed in white and buried, she is forever subjected to heteropatriarchal doctrines of sexuality, in that the disabled should not be allowed to procreate and carry on a lineage of less-than-perfect “monsters”.

The consequences of this imposition onto the *lusus naturae* begin to actualize after her mother’s departure -- “I began to explore the limits of my power. I found I had a great deal more of it when unseen than when seen, and most of all when partly seen. I frightened two children in the woods, on purpose: I showed them my pink teeth, my hairy face, my red fingernails, I mewed at them, and they ran away screaming.” (5). This event is eerily similar to the happenings in *Frankenstein*, when the monster is enraged at his rejection by humans. Hale states that “The monster’s murderous acts themselves have a certain sexual charge. When the monster kills William, his urge to ‘seize him’ is a violent impulse based nonetheless on a desire to connect with another living being (Shelley 122).” (15). Both the monster and the *lusus naturae* begin to retaliate against their history of mistreatment through the defense mechanism of displacement -- an inherently Freudian action, involving the displacement of (usually angry) emotion onto a weaker, more vulnerable subject.

Visibility begins to pose a threat to the *lusus naturae* and to Frankenstein’s monster, who is a master of concealment and is hyper-vigilant his surroundings throughout the novel. The

experience of feeling like someone, somewhere is staring at you is commonplace for the disabled person. The *lusus naturae* is aware of her deformity, and, according to the beauty standards of the normative world, she has already lost, and is thus unable to resist oppression. However, her gaze into the mirror is visceral, innocent and true. She recalls, “I saw something, but that something was not myself: it looked nothing like the innocent, pretty girl I knew myself to be, at heart. But now...I’ve become too visible.” (5-6). It is here that she begins to validate her internal monologue, instead of simply deferring to the thoughts, concerns, and desires of others. This is the pivotal point in which she clings to her humanity instead of her monstrosity and begins to resist ableist narrative. As circumstantially and consciously innocent as she may seem, a sexual awakening will follow and the incantation of full resistance will be complete.

The derivation of sexual pleasure from murder, evidenced in Hale’s analysis of *Frankenstein*, breeds an assertion of power and deviance that is necessary in the formerly-suppressed expression of the “self”. Hale contends, “Denied sexual gratification, the monster repeats the act of murder, displaying that very ‘presence of a sadistic component in the sexual instinct’ which can, in Freud’s terms, ‘dominate an individual’s entire sexual activity’ (Freud 621).” (5). It can be argued that the *lusus naturae* is too retaliating against the uncompromising, exclusionary world through sadism, as expressed through sexuality -- “I’m sorry to say I lost control. I laid my red-nailed hands on him. I bit him on the neck. Was it lust or hunger? How could I tell the difference?” (6). It is here that the nature of consequence makes itself known, originating from a lifelong incompleteness. Adequate sexual education is not something that is frequently imparted onto the disabled, let alone to most individuals. The significance of the rhetorical questions posited by the *lusus naturae* illustrates the long-standing

and stubborn effects of this “incompleteness”. Lustfulness IS a hunger, and when one has never been fed, they will devour (literally by biting someone on the neck!).

Similarly, “When the monster realizes the impossibility of achieving any human connectedness, he chooses instead to seek release through the powerful emotion created by the suffering of others, an emotion which simultaneously ‘produces sexuality’.” (Hale, 16). The *lulus naturae*, however, does not initially understand the impossibility of human connectedness -- rather, she identifies with the copulators, recognizing them as “...beings like [herself]...What a consolation it would be to [her] if [she], too, could join in! Through the years [she] had hardened [herself] to loneliness; now [she] found that hardness dissolving.” (6). The bite, however, is inherently sadistic -- indicating that identification is a fraud. Her newfound power is *bitingly* retaliatory against the maltreatment and neglect she had undergone in her critical youth -- a period in which the oral, anal, and phallic reign supreme. The bite marks the end of latency, and the beginning of the milestone of genitality.

The final and most prominent resistance of oppression arrives during a stream of consciousness -- “I’ve put on my white burial dress, my white veil, as befits a virgin...it’s time for me to take flight. I’ll fall from the burning rooftop like a comet, I’ll blaze like a bonfire...Perhaps in Heaven I’ll look like an angel. Or perhaps the angels will look like me. What a surprise that will be, for everyone else! It’s something to look forward to.” Reverting back to Hale’s original thesis about death -- “In *Frankenstein*, Shelley overtly links death and romantic love, death and procreation, and death and the erotic.” (15), it is possible to draw a parallel between the two stories. Death immediately follows the *lulus naturae*’s act of sexual violence. However unfortunate, it is arguably the most liberating thing to have ever occurred to the *lulus*

naturae. The monster operates in similarly, in his derivation of sexual pleasure from his murderous heinousness -- death is a means to an end, an unfathomable outlet for frustrative rebellion, a reaction -- for both parties. With the resilience of a phoenix, she acknowledges and embraces the unraveling of the taboo of unconscious desire. This event is the single and final resolution of psychosexual conflict. She vindicates her own purity as an affection-starved entity -- hence, she dresses in white -- and does not berate herself for it. Rather, this excerpt serves as a criticism -- an exposé of society's fatal flaw in producing this identity in people by means of restriction and limitation. The stark dramatic irony employed is also affirmative of her innocence; an ethereality far too great for the unforgiving world. And thus, she assumes the role of an angel and takes flight. A commentary is made on the disabled, who are construed to be angelic in a sexually chaste way. However, she dispels this notion by martyrizing her existence and upholding her purity regardless of her sexual inclinations as a disabled person — maybe, the angels truly *will* look like her.

Applying Hale's lens of psychoanalysis to Frankenstein and analogizing the conclusions to *Lusus Naturae*, it can be concluded that the *lusus naturae*'s actions stem from sexual deprivation as a result of the sexually inhibitory narrative of ableism. Though this oppression is not overcome in a literal and physical sense, it is overcome metaphysically through liberation by means of death. Atwood's story is inherently critical of this deprivation and ableism -- the story can be read as a "cautionary tale", chastising the processes that allow for such "misfortunes" to ensue. However, the overall success of the protagonist functions as a wedge and hammer to the concrete, separative wall that is social taboo.

### **Works Cited**

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