Education and the debate of Nature versus Nurture in Frankenstein

Noble Savage or tabula rasa?

Frankenstein's creature as Other
It is clear from the representation of the birth of the creature that Mary Shelley drew on ideas about black people. She grew up when discussions about the abolition of slavery and the subsequent improvement of former slaves' lives were widespread.

In London, she would see many black men and women, now abandoned by their owners and trying to make a living.

Representations of black people in the press/art etc moved away from the exotic over-dressed butlers that served in the houses of the rich to the semi-naked, vision of Otherness, childlike and an object of pity.

Ignatius Sancho (the 18th century Black writer and composer)

Black people certainly were known to be bigger and stronger than most white people – think about the stature of the creature.

In 1810 and 1811: a Black American boxer called Thomas Molineaux almost defeated the reigning white champion Tom Cribb prompting much concern.

*Slave Trade Act 1807: which outlawed the slave trade, but not slavery itself
* The Slavery Abolition Act 1833 – throughout British Empire

Noble savage

The term noble savage expresses the concept of an idealized outsider, or "other" and refers to the literary stock character.

The "Noble Savage" is an idealized stereotype of indigenous people as found throughout the world. Writers have glorified the life of the character in wild settings, exaggerated their physical prowess, given them an innocent outlook and lofty virtues.
The term "Noble Savage," itself, was coined in the 18th century by Jean Jacques Rousseau in his famous essay, "Social Contract." To Rousseau, the Noble Savage represented "natural man," an individual in an initial purer state, uncorrupted by contact with the complexities and compromises of society, living in nature according to nature's own rhythms and patterns (according to "natural law").

Initially, a Noble Savage was content to just enjoy nature – heat, light, sensations—and we see this in the text. However, in Rousseau's natural state – man lacks much: language; capacity to think rationally; companionship and the power of emotions; and a moral consciousness. Therefore, Mary moves away from Rousseau's idea of a noble savage only content with bodily sensations, self-preservation and some empathy with others to show the creature is more like Locke's idea of a tabula rasa – innocent but somebody who learns from his environment.

She is also very critical of Frankenstein's patriarchal creation of the creature – who he forms without care or concern for his appearance intent only on controlling nature. She raises the question that if a being so hideous was created and abandoned without education or guidance – how can they turn into good human beings? Frankenstein holds his creature morally accountable for his actions – but should he?

**Education of the creature:**

- Unlike his creator, who is brought up by a loving mother and father, the creature is abandoned at birth
- Initially, he behaves like a Noble Savage – enjoying light, food etc
- But his key role model in De Lacey’s – the behaviour of the father towards his children (though they are without a mother – like Mary Shelley)
- The behaviour of the De Lacey’s stimulate his emotions; move him to being good – selfless – in getting the firewood.
- He develops a spoken and written language.
- Learns social and human injustice – how De Lacey’s are treated and the cruelty of Safie’s Turkish father.
- While Frankenstein’s father also nurtured him, he did not guide his reading, which lead to the discredited scientific, occult and magic books.
- Mary is know to have read the same books as her creature
- From Plutarch’s Lives of Noble Romans he learns heroism, public virtue and civil justice.
- From Volney’s Ruins: political corruption and decline of civilizations
- Milton’s Paradise Lost: origins of man’s goodness and evil – Adam born with the ability to commit sin – which he does when tempted by Eve and is banished from Paradise. For Romantics, Satan is seen as a noble rebel who refuses to be ruled by the absolute power of God. So Satan is seen to challenge theocratic oppression.
- Werther – range of human emotions and power of rhetoric to convey ideas and feeling
• Socially, Mary was isolated from her father and did not have emotional input
• Some see her as a motherless child – in patriarchal society without role models, without a history or identity

Mary Shelley’s criticism of Rousseau:
In the novel we see Rousseau’s ideas from his text *Emile: God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil.*

Rousseau also was highly critical of a lack of parenting from mother (conveniently not criticizing fathers):
‘A man left to himself from birth would be a more than a monster than the rest.’

However Rousseau, abandoned his five children by his mistress Theresa to the Parisian Foundling Hospital. She wrote about this, in an essay on Rousseau for an encyclopedia of French authors.

‘Rousseau by no means appreciates the real extent of his misconduct on this occasion. . . . Theresa was about to become a mother. . . . Rousseau did not like to multiply ties between himself and his mistress and her family: he was needy...Five of his children were thus sent to a receptacle where few survive; and those who do go through life are brutified by their situation, or depressed by the burden, ever weighing at the heart, that they have not inherited the commonest right of humanity, a parent’s care.

It is clear that Shelley is aware that to remain a Noble Savage is not ideal but that a move towards self-consciousness also brings problems. When the creature is aware of society, the inequality that he suffers; and that his hideous appearance will mean he is always shunned by society and destined to be alone – he is plunged into despair and then revenge for his impossible situation.
So Shelley goes further in criticizing the unthinking patriarchal creation of a ‘child’ by Frankenstein. She raises a huge debate about the importance of nurture versus nature and of education.

Influence of Mary Wollstencraft and education
Mary’s mother Mary Wollstencraft was passionate about the need for education arguing that it was vital for the formation of well-rounded individuals. And that a lack of education was almost impossible to change later in life.
She also argued that women needed to be better educated to enable them to develop from a child-like state, become more balanced and socially aware to either bring up their own children or influence society.

Ultimately, Shelley comes out on the side of nurture placing a key part.
However, she also raises questions:
• Can a monster so created ever be good? (like Adam, he has a tendency to sin and then be punished)
• Why was not more care taken in his creation?
• The absence of mothers who see children as people and not in an unequal relationship is significant in this text – does that relate to her own upbringing?