“Intrinsic Motivation and the Absence of Satisfaction in *Genesis*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*”

Ryan J. Perri

Psychologist David Beswick, during a presentation at St. Hilda’s College Senior Common Room on Fellows Night in May of 2000, had said, “Curiosity, and the related more general field of intrinsic motivation, has been recognized as playing a part in a wide range of human endeavour... By intrinsic motivation we mean a process of arousal and satisfaction in which the rewards come from carrying out an activity rather from a result of the activity. We speak of the rewards being intrinsic to a task rather than the task being a means to an end which is rewarded or satisfying” (Beswick). In interpreting the words of Beswick, his definition and description of intrinsic motivation draw strong connection to several pieces of literature. It is a natural tendency for beings of complex intelligence to be curious about things which they do not know of or about, and with that curiosity must also come the unwonted powers of temptation, desire, and motivation. These are factors which urge exploration and discovery of new entities that await in life, whether they are tangible or not. However, in the book of *Genesis*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of*
Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, an individual's quest to search for answers appears to lead to an absence of satisfaction, thereby producing irreversible consequences as a result of the actions carried out by those individuals. The first example of this can be seen in Genesis, where God creates the heavens, the Earth, and life in six consecutive days, resting on the seventh. God shows admiration for his particular creation at the end of each day. When he had created light on the first day, "God saw that the light was good" (Genesis 1:4). Then, God created sky, land, and water. "God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:10). This process of creating things and terming them as "good" continued as God then proceeded to create vegetation, stars, creatures that lived in water and birds, wild animals on land, and finally, humankind. In conclusion, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). His world was seemingly flawless. The intentions of forming a world in which all would remain good bloomed out of pure love from the Lord. His curiosity and pleasant reaction to each of his creations in sequence only motivated him to further expand and improve upon what he already had deemed as good. As time passed, God began to see the wickedness of humankind and became immensely upset, as seen in the instance where Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and came to know good from evil. Or in
another, when humans chose to resort to violent means to try to terminate matters of conflict among their own kind...the prime example of this being when Cain murders his brother Abel and later questions God by saying “...am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9). Clearly, God had put his faith and trust in humankind, giving them alone the sole control over life and death of every other living species on the planet. Humans took advantage of the significant responsibilities given to them, and God’s disappointment with his creation becomes evident. In aftermath, “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Genesis 6:5-6). God’s once perfect world was now abundant in flaws. God had turned his back on his own creation. What he had originally thought of as good, he now despised, as he realized that humankind had strayed too distant from his own image, the one in which he had created them. It is clear then that the Lord’s good intentions backfired on him. No longer did he find satisfaction in the creation of human beings on Earth, and no longer did he support their existence. Therefore, God eliminated the cause of his disappointment by wiping out the entire human race (except for Noah, his family, and one male and one female of each animal species) in a massive flood of waters from the heavens, allowing for the
human race to begin anew. The true reason behind God electing to destroy the majority of his creations was almost certainly due completely to the lack of satisfaction in his work's end product.

A similar “creature creator” to “creature created” relationship is observed in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. “From this day natural philosophy, and particularly chemistry, in the most comprehensive sense of the term, became nearly my sole occupation” (Shelley 50). This is the point at which the central character in the novel, Victor Frankenstein, decides that the field science, specifically chemistry, is where his true passion lies. Just before that time, Victor was already intrigued by outdated alchemist writings, his chemistry professor’s class lectures, and probably most importantly, the laboratory machinery shown to him. Frankenstein’s high level of curiosity led him to wonder what it would be like to create a living human being by using body parts of the deceased. Again, it is worth mentioning that creators seem to have a natural tendency to react to that initial curiosity, to develop emotions as a direct result, and then, to allow for those emotions to fuel an inner fire of motivation as they find themselves in pursuit of excellence and personal satisfaction? Just as God found himself unable to cease in making improvements to what already existed, Frankenstein also found himself in an intense state of determination to complete a certain task. “Winter, spring, and summer passed away during my labours; but I did not watch the blossom or the expanding
leaves—sights which before always yielded me supreme delight—so deeply was I engrossed in my occupation” (Shelley 56). Not once did Frankenstein even take a single moment to reflect on nature’s beauty. Instead, he completely engulfed himself in a frantic frenzy, directing all of his efforts to finalize an experimental project into which an enormous amount of time, energy, and faith had been steadily transferred.

Frankenstein initially showed great thrill and devotion during the long and tedious process of creating the creature, but these positive feelings remained only up until the moment when the creature was actually brought to life, when the creator had “infuse[d] a spark of being into the lifeless thing” (Shelley 57). The result of the experiment was a complete horror to Frankenstein, as he commented, “I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardor that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (Shelley 57). As the creature began killing off Frankenstein’s friends and family members, that monster’s abhorrent image grew to haunt the creator for the remainder of his life. Rather than Frankenstein being able to use his accomplishment to comfort him in his times of loneliness, Frankenstein, in contrast, lived in absence of satisfaction. Curiosity got the best of the man, causing him to
live the rest of his life in fear and hatred of the hideous creature he had created. This was a downfall led on by the inability of man to control his sense of curiosity, and as consequence, man also lost his sense of self-worth and competence, leaving him abandoned in a world that, to him, seems almost foreign.

In Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, it is proved that an individual's intrinsic motivation has overwhelming force upon his or her actions. Yet again, an absence of satisfaction occurs as the outcome of a circumstance that would ordinarily call for joyfulness, and perhaps, a celebration in triumph. Douglass follows a sequence of life events that bring him closer and closer to absolute freedom and away from slavery and servitude. This freedom that he aspires to maintain one day in the future is the prime curiosity lingering inside his mind, and he is motivated to act upon that curiosity almost instantaneously. One of the first of the events to occur was when Douglass left Colonel Lloyd's plantation to move to Baltimore. Later came the task of learning how to read by merely teaching himself. Douglass said, "Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read" (Douglass 29). It has been said before that knowledge is power. Douglass' gaining of an education was able to bring him another step closer to becoming a free man. "I finally succeeded in learning to read
and write” (Douglass 35), he said. Douglass later found enough courage within himself to stand up to his white master, Mr. Covey, who had gone for too long mistreating Douglass. Douglass said about this, “I resolved to fight...This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave” (Douglass 50). The next event to occur chronologically was when Douglass learned how to calk for a shipbuilder named Mr. William Gardner. Ultimately, through means which Douglass refuses to reveal, he became a free man in the world. In regard to this, he stated, “...on the third day of September, 1838, I left my chains, and succeeded in reaching New York without the slightest interruption of any kind. How I did so, --what means I adopted, --what direction I traveled, and by what mode of conveyance, --I must leave unexplained” (Douglass 69).

Douglass' goal had finally been reached with success. It is truly remarkable to bear witness to all of the stages of progress in Douglass' life in transition from a slave to a free man. However, only one question remains unexplained. That is, what were Douglass' feelings as a freed man? Douglass said about this, “I have been frequently asked how I felt when I found myself in a free State. I have never been able to answer the question with any satisfaction to myself” (Douglass 69). After all of his learning, after all of his improvement, after all his effort, courage, and determination, all he can say is that he is unable to answer that question in satisfaction? In fact, Douglass claims he
became very lonely. Ultimately, his initial purpose and dream to find freedom fall by the wayside, and mental happiness is therefore replaced by a lack of satisfaction in what it really means to be free. It is indeed evident that in *Genesis*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, there is definitely an intrinsic motivation, an inner curiosity, in each separate individual; yet, each also showed signs of an abandonment of personal satisfaction in life and resulting consequences that were incapable of being altered. Psychologist David Beswick’s beliefs do seem to possess some truth to them. Those beliefs give insight into not only what the individuals encountered in these particular analyzed works, but also into the real world. God saw good during creation, but wickedness in aftermath. Victor Frankenstein found joy in creating a monster, but was disgusted with the final product. Douglass’ strong will and determination led to freedom, but what resulted were ambiguous thoughts regarding the level of satisfaction he experienced in gaining that liberty. Perhaps individuals really do find more satisfaction in performing a task, rather than after the completion of it. Using your own intrinsic motivation, are you curious to find out if this is true or not?

Works Cited


Questions for discussion: While this essay *looks* like well-thought prose—quotations, claims, questions, etc.—what points does Ryan make that help you *feel* where he is going with this paper? Where do you *hear* Ryan's own opinion the loudest? How do you think Ryan would answer the last question himself?