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Self Loathing, Racism, and Frankenstein's Monster

In 1947, psychologists Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie P. Clark conducted a series of tests on African-American children to test racial biases. This influential study was cited in *Brown v. Board of Education*, contributed to the desegregation of schools in 1954, and has become quite famous for its presentation of racial biases and the effects they have on people of color. The participants were presented with white dolls and, due to lack of actual black dolls, white dolls painted brown. The children were asked to identify the dolls based on a series of questions such as which doll would you like to play with, which doll is nice, which doll is bad, and which doll is a nice color. The results of this test demonstrates that black children hold a preference for white skinned dolls and presumably lighter skinned individuals as well.

The study introduces the problem of racial preference and the detrimental effects it can have on African-American people. 253 children were tested, 116 of which were boys and 137 were girls. There were slightly more southern children of both genders included in the study. Clark and Clark make no mention of the painted nature of the dolls, and images of the actual study show that the white and black dolls were identical in all aspects except for hair color and skin color, see figure 1. While it could have been the case that a white doll painted brown looked upsetting, this conclusion is not supported by the notes of the study. The procedure is laid out with an emphasis on the questions asked to the participants of the study. The questions determined racial preference and the identity of the participant. The questions were effective

because they were subjective and not meant to lead the children to a certain answer. It was the child's choice to identify the doll that looks like them as the "bad doll" and the white doll as the "nicest doll." Clark and Clark mention in the study that they ordered the questions with specific preference first and then identity of participant, because when they asked the participant to identify with the dolls first, the child established a preference for the doll with which they identified. This, according to the Clarks, did not necessarily prove actual preference because those responses were based on ego. Clark and Clark tried to frame the test in a way that removed the participant's ego from their responses; however, it is impossible to completely remove someone's ego from his or her mind. Nevertheless, the study effectively confronts the source of preference by removing conscious choice to get at the subconscious bias.

The study included discussions of differences among the participants, including skin color, age, and geographical location. Some of the children easily identified which doll was the ugliest, but they struggled to pick the doll with which they identified. These children tried to lie and pretend to be white or they made up excuses as to why their skin color looked like the dolls. These responses amplified the results of the study, indicating that some of the African American children were ashamed of their identity.

It is interesting that the study was conducted with African American children, who still identified the doll that looked the most similar to them as the bad doll. The study contradicts the popular idea that people find beauty in what reflects them the most. If that were the case, the black children would have found the black doll to be the prettiest, yet they almost all identified the white doll as the prettiest.

The study articulates its conclusions in a clear way that equates the responses with either skin color, age, sex, or geographical differences and then explained what that meant in terms of

the children's education. Lighter skinned children said they identified more with the white doll, despite being African American. From age three to seven, a majority of the children in each age category liked the white doll more. Northern children had a greater preference for the white doll than southern children in segregated schools. The results of each category are accompanied with a graph that summarizes all of the data and occasionally reasons for discrepancies in the numbers.

The Supreme Court's citation of The Doll Test in *Brown V. Board of Education* qualified the results of the study in the sense that segregation was recognized as a racist institution that created a sense of inferiority in African American children. Psychologist Kenneth Clark was frustrated with the Supreme Court's refusal to admit there was truth in two of the study's other findings: racism is an institution inherent in America and that white children will also benefit from desegregation of schools. Because the study did not involve white children, the plausible claim that white children will benefit from desegregation is not supported by the study. What the test appears to be missing is the responses of white children to serve as a control for the African American children and also offer another conclusion and piece of evidence for desegregating schools. No matter how the research was applied, the Doll Test was recognized as valid research by the highest court and by the general American population, and the idea of the study has stood the test of time. In spite of methodological criticisms, several authors have successfully replicated the findings and the impact of the research continues to be explored. In 1987, a survey found that 70% of parents included in the test refused to buy black dolls for their children¹, despite them becoming available for purchase as early as 1910². A similar study to the Doll Test was conducted in 2006 and 2010 using Barbie Dolls and the results were almost identical, almost

¹ <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/00957984880142006?journalCode=jbpa>

² www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/25/black-dolls-collection-african-american-history

50 years after the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964³. In both studies, children, both white and black, identified the black doll as bad and the white doll as nice.

Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*, supports two critical points about the Doll Test. The first is that even children have racial biases, and no one can be truly untainted by the world around them. Second, the novel provides perspective on the damage this kind of treatment can have on an individual who is told by society that he is "ugly."

When Frankenstein's monster is abandoned because of his horrid appearance by the adults in society, he seeks approval from children. He believes children will be kinder because they are untainted by the biases of others. The creature exclaims, "an idea seized me, that this creature was unprejudiced, and had lived too short to have imbibed a horror of deformity" (117). However, the first child he comes upon is disgusted by the monster and immediately berates him with insults: "ugly wretch! You wish to eat me or tear me to pieces—you are an ogre" (Shelley 117). This scene supports the findings of the doll test because the child acted with biases about "goodness" and "ugliness." The monster's appearance makes people afraid of him because he looked like a beast. The child possibly finds the monster frightening because the child has read or seen Grimm's fairytales or other stories and relates ugliness to villainous behavior. It is a trope still used in movies and books today: bad characters are frequently portrayed as ugly. The modern day Frankenstein reflected in the Doll Test is the idea that children are subconsciously racist or have racist biases even if they themselves are not directly racist. Children learn from their parents and the world around them at a very early age, and that education comes through in subtle ways, such as when they are asked to identify which doll they like better. People are often

³ <http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/05/13/doll.study/index.html>

influenced by other people's perceptions of something, as was the case when the monster started a friendship with the blind man. The monster recounts his anguish at being alone, to which De Lacey replies, "the hearts of men, when unprejudiced by any obvious self interest, are full of brotherly love and charity" (109). However, the family clearly is prejudiced against the monster's appearance, for when they return, the women scream and cry and the men beat the monster away from the cottage. The family is described as feeling "horror" and "consternation," and, because of these reactions, the monster loses his only friend and the only man to ever show kindness to him.

Another aspect of the Doll Test reflected in the novel is the potential danger and detrimental effects self loathing can have on a person, such as promotion of segregation and an inferiority complex, which are revealed through the creature's response to being turned away by humanity. The monster grows angry in the novel and vows to get revenge on the humans who have wronged him. The monster ends up killing the child that calls the monster hideous because he is upset that the child refuses to love him. When the monster rescues a young girl from a river and is shot by her boyfriend, he becomes infused with rage, fuming just before he faints, "the feelings of kindness and gentleness, which I had entertained but a few moments ago, gave place to a hellish rage and gnashing of teeth. Inflamed by pain, I vowed eternal hatred and vengeance to all of mankind" (116). When he must defend his vile actions to his creator, the monster says, "I am malicious because I am miserable" (119). The number of times the monster was told he was ugly took a toll on him, and he turned to violence and murder to cope with this psychological pain. The perception of others is initially rejected, but ultimately accepted and reflected in behavior. Because he is continually told he is ugly, the monster accepts society's perspective and ultimately behaves in an ugly manner. This inferiority complex also leads to a

certain amount of exclusivity that is dangerous for society. When the creature demands Frankenstein make him a wife, he specifies that she must be “as hideous as myself” (120). Frankenstein’s monster only wants to associate with beings that resemble himself. This mindset could be considered grievous in terms of race because it could manifest into promotion of segregation.

While the children involved in the 1947 study are not murderers, it is clear from their self-negating responses that the segregated country in which they lived took a toll on their psychological well-being. The Doll Test lends sympathy to the character of the monster by demonstrating the legitimate psychological problem with the way he has been treated by society. Rather than view him as solely a murderer, the reader gains an insight into the monster’s damaged sense of self. *Frankenstein* goes slightly beyond the Doll Test by demonstrating the consequences of self hatred. The children in the study were actively admitting that they found their own skin color to be less attractive than that of white people, and, like Frankenstein’s monster, bad. In the novel, these thoughts led the creature to become violent and angry towards those who had wronged him. Self hatred is detrimental to one’s mental state and can lead to feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and sometimes depression. The Doll Test offers a scientific example of the theme of beauty explored in *Frankenstein* and reveals some significant and devastating information about the damaging effect self loathing can have on a person.



Figure 1

Works Cited

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