Frankenstein: Allegory of Adolescent Angst

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Introduction

For the first-time reader of *Frankenstein* to truly appreciate Mary Shelley’s masterpiece, it is necessary to lay aside any preconceived notions about plot, theme or character we might bring to the experience. Shelley’s creature is not the monster of the Saturday afternoon horror matinee, nor is he the caricature who appears each Halloween. He is someone with whom we all have more in common than would appear on the surface. In writing *Frankenstein*, Shelley has committed to paper the angst of the prototypical adolescent; the fragile hopes, lost dreams, and feelings of despair echoing those we all have felt.

Innocent as a child, Victor Frankenstein’s creation flees from the place of his genesis, seeking shelter in the country, his “senses…gravitated and refreshed by a thousand scents of delight, and a thousand sights of beauty” (Shelley 77). It is here, as he tries to make sense of his life, that he secretly observes a family of cottagers. This has a manifold effect on him. He learns to speak and read, which “open[s] before [him] a wide field of wonder and delight” (Shelley 79). But with these discoveries comes the additional burden of knowing that he is different from those with whom he so desperately desires to connect. His feelings are not so different from many adolescents—he is an outsider, he doesn’t belong, and no one understands him.

He becomes a deeply troubled individual who questions the meaning of his existence, asking, “Who [am] I? What [am] I? Whence did I come? What [is] my destination?” (Shelley 86). He struggles with feelings of inadequacy and is tormented with self-loathing, viewing himself as “a wretched outcast” (Shelley 88). He desires to “become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which [he] is now excluded” (Shelley 100). When he reaches out to
others, he is shunned. As the deep-seated grief of exclusion and rejection erodes the humanity of the creature, he turns to violence.

Mary Shelley tapped into her own experience with early loss and upheaval to flesh out one of literature’s most memorable characters. In many ways, the metamorphic journey the creature embarks on mirrors the human passage through adolescence, making him a figure with whom the world can relate.
Chronology

1797, March 29: Mary Wollstonecraft (MW) and William Godwin (WG) marry. She is pregnant with their first child.

1797, August 30: Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (MWG) born in London.

1797, September 10: MW dies of puerperal (childbirth) fever.

1801, December 21: WG remarries, to Mary Jane Clairmont (MJG), who adds her children, Mary Jane, later Claire (CC) and Charles Clairmont to the blended family.

1812, November 11: MWG meets Percy Bysshe Shelley (PBS) and his wife, Harriet Westbrook Shelley when they dine at the Godwin home.

1814, May 5: MWG meets PBS again; friendship develops; Godwins are clueless as to seriousness of developing relationship.

1814, July 28: MWG and PBS, with CC, elope to continent; travel through France, Germany, Switzerland and Holland.


1816, January 24: MWG gives birth to William Shelley

1816, May: Shelleys travels to Geneva; take a house near Byron and Polidori.
1816, June 15, 16: Byron proposes ghost story writing contest; MWG begins writing *Frankenstein*.

1816, December 9 or 10: Harriet Shelley suicide.

1816, December 30: MWG (MWS) and PBS marry at St. Mildred’s Church, London.

1817, September 2: MWS gives birth to daughter, Clara.

1818, January 1: *Frankenstein* published.

1818, September 24: Clara Shelley dies in Venice.

1819, June 7: William Shelley dies of malaria.

1819, November 12: MWS gives birth to son, Percy Florence Shelley.

1822, June 16: MWS miscarries; PBS saves her from hemorrhaging by putting her in a vat of ice water.

1822, July 8: PBS drowns in Gulf of Spezia.

1831, November: MWS publishes revised third edition of *Frankenstein* with “Author’s Introduction.”

1836, April 7: WG dies.

1850, December 17: MWS diagnosed with brain tumor.

1851, February 1: MWS dies at age fifty-three at home in London.
Web Sites

The Literary Gothic. This site offers links to web sites, e-texts, resources for 

*Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley’s other works, books, critical essays, 
and reviews. Be sure to check out the Wollstonecraft Hyper- 
Concordance link.

[http://www.litgothic.com/Authors/authors.html](http://www.litgothic.com/Authors/authors.html).

Literary History.com A bibliography of active links for Mary Shelley; favors recognized 

scholars and articles published in reviewed sources, web sites that 

adhere to MLA guidelines.


Literature Resource Center. Gale Databases is a treasure-trove of useful information for literary 

research. Type in the author’s name and gain access to essays, 

critical reviews, biographies, etc.


National Library of Medicine. The remains of a 1997-98 exhibit “*Frankenstein* Penetrating the 

Secrets of Nature.” Contains text and graphics relating to all 

things *Frankenstein*.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. A lengthy biography of the author, as well as reading lists and links to other Mary Shelley web sites.

http://people.brandeis.edu/~teuber/shelleybio.html.
Biographical Impressions

Mary Wollstonecraft’s perceived abandonment and William Godwin’s actual rejection of their daughter may have played a catalytic role in the development of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley’s most famous literary work. Born the only child of a union between the infamous couple, she grew up in the shadow of her influential activist father and her publicly maligned (in the *Anti-Jacobin Review* of 1798, “See Mary Wollstonecraft” is the only listing under “Prostitution”) author mother, who died shortly after giving birth to Mary (Ty par. 3). Her parents were vocal opponents of institutionalized marriage, wedding five months before Mary’s birth, and then only to give their daughter social respectability (Ty par. 2).

When she was four years old, her father remarried, introducing a step-family into the Godwin household. From all accounts, Mary’s relationship with her stepmother, Mary Jane Godwin, was one of tension, and jealousy over Mary’s closeness to her father (Ty par. 6). In her formative years, she was nourished on a steady diet of the radical philosophies of her parents. It is not surprising that Mary would metabolize some of these ideas into her character.

When Mary first met Percy Shelley, the new, young disciple of William Godwin, he was a married man. Shortly after, he began to support the Godwin family, who were struggling financially. Two years after their initial encounter, they met again. Dissatisfied in his marriage, and intrigued by the offspring of the two most influential radicals of the time, Percy began a relationship with sixteen-year-old Mary (Ty par. 8). Against the wishes of her family, she eloped to the continent with Percy. By this time, William Godwin had become more conservative in his personal life; and disapproving of his daughter’s choices, he openly rejected the couple. Mary bore two children within one year; the couple finally wed following the suicide of Percy’s wife Harriet (Ty pars. 9, 10).
Mary’s experiences would become fodder for a fertile mind. One of the main themes of *Frankenstein* is parental abandonment and rejection. Victor Frankenstein is abandoned by his mother when she dies. Following the creation of the monster, Victor perpetuates the abandonment cycle when he flees, leaving his creature to fend for himself. Did Mary see herself as a monster, abandoned by her own creator/mother? (Ty par. 13). These episodes could be read as thinly-veiled attempts by Shelley to verbalize her own ambivalent feelings toward the circumstances surrounding her birth and the memory of her deceased mother.

Victor’s parents reject him by denying him a spontaneous, carefree childhood in favor of a carefully controlled, duty-bound existence. One could argue that Mary experienced a similarly disrupted childhood, being encompassed by the radical intellectual circles of her father. Alphonse Frankenstein continues the pattern of rejection by dismissing his son’s enthusiasm for learning with a brief, distracted response. Victor turns to other sources for validation, seeking out other father figures to take the place of his own distant parent (Shelley). Did William Godwin’s rejection of Mary have a similar effect on her? The answer would seem to be a resounding yes. Some of the choices she made in her teenage years could be considered classic high-risk behavior. She may have been acting out against her father and a society that had rejected her. Perhaps Mary was struggling to affirm her value as an individual and trying to make sense in her own mind of her conflicting identities. Who was she really? William and Mary’s daughter? Percy’s partner/wife? These questions came at a time in her life when Mary was dealing with the physical and emotional trauma of the birth and subsequent death of her first child. The absence of her mother would have been profoundly felt (Ty par. 18). It is telling that all of the mother figures in *Frankenstein* are either dead or die during the course of the story (Shelley).
The emotional upheaval that Mary Shelley experienced early in life, with all its implications, would reverberate through time and space, leaving an indelible impression on the pages of her celebrated novel. In some aspects, the lives of the characters mirror her own. Ultimately, Shelley addresses the question of her identity by coming out from the shadows cast by her parents and husband to become a strong, independent woman capable of standing on her own.
Critical Interpretations

“Wedding Guests/Wedding Ghosts,”

Mary Lowe-Evans comes to the conclusion that ghosts from Mary Shelley’s past, particularly those of her parents, contributed to the decidedly anti-institutionalized marriage tone of her most famous novel. But they weren’t the only specters who played a role in the germination of *Frankenstein*.

Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin’s vocal criticisms of marriage, followed by an apparent vacillation, in the form of their own wedding, sent mixed signals to their daughter. Her conflicted feelings on the subject of marriage are evident in the original version of the novel, as well as the 1831 version, in which she modified the text to more closely align with the cultural and social mores of the day, portraying marriage as the glue that holds society together.

Percy Shelley provides the impetus for the character of Victor Frankenstein. Like Percy, Victor wasn’t exactly an eager bridegroom. His disturbing dream, which foreshadows the wedding-night murder of Elizabeth, and his destruction of the female monster both point to an ambivalent attitude toward women in general, and marriage in particular. Their deaths mark the demise of hope for happiness in marriage.

When she wrote *Frankenstein*, Mary had eloped with Percy, and as a result, was rejected by her father. Without marriage, she and her children were illegitimate. By her own account, Mary allowed Percy to change her manuscript as he saw fit, making it a product of their condemned relationship and him a ghostwriter. The introduction Mary later wrote for her novel references Percy and the influence he had over her writing in what might be construed as a tone of resentment. He and Byron would continue to leave their imprints on Mary for the rest of her life (Lowe-Evans).
“The Noble Savage in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*”

Milton Millhauser maintains that readers and critics alike have overlooked an aspect of *Frankenstein* that could shed light on the book, as well as its author: the theme of the natural man. He observes that this theme is a nod to the liberal environment in which Mary Shelley was reared.

Considering her parentage and marriage connection, it isn’t surprising that certain aspects of social radicalism would surface in Shelley’s writing. Millhauser’s complaint is that she fails to effectively assimilate the Noble Savage into the rest of the novel. He suggests that the theme harms the plot and has to be cast aside before the story can move forward.

A large portion of the novel is spent in describing the monster in such sympathetic terms that it becomes difficult to see him as capable of the violence and crimes he commits later in the book. Millhauser believes that the time spent by Shelley in characterizing the monster as she does leads the reader to expectations of plot development which never materialize. She fails to take advantage of an opportunity to address the issue of society’s injustice, the knowledge of which the monster has internalized through self-education and observation.

Millhauser contends that though the inclination to veer off course on a Godwinian tangent was strong, Mary Shelley gives in to the greater attraction that Percy Shelley’s world holds for her. The Noble Savage is abandoned in favor of what sells: melodrama (Millhauser).
“Frankenstein, Invisibility, and Nameless Dread,”

Victor Frankenstein’s perfect childhood is a fiction he invented as a defense mechanism. Lee Zimmerman suggests that the emotional abandonment of the monster by Victor is the natural result of the abandonment Victor experienced at the hands of his own parents. The events that occur in the story are a graphic illustration of what happens when parents fail to show love toward their child.

On the surface, Victor’s description of his early years sounds idyllic. But a deeper look reveals a setting where the natural impulses of childhood are supplanted by structure, duty and self-control. Alphonse Frankenstein’s response to the enthusiasm his son shows for a book he has been reading paints a chilling portrait of a present, but emotionally distant father. Victor is seen, yet not seen by his father. The theme of invisibility and the desire for recognition continues through Frankenstein. Victor’s mother fails to acknowledge the possibility of his desires being different from her own when, on her deathbed, she dictates his future: marriage to Elizabeth.

Following the deaths of William, Justine and Clerval, Victor seeks comfort from his father, who basically tells him to shut up and get over it. The lessons of his early childhood are repeated: repress your emotions and do your duty. The people around him refuse to meet his emotional needs, in effect, making him invisible. He internalizes his distress and it becomes a nameless dread, or in other words, the monster (Zimmerman).
“Narcissism as Symptom and Structure: The Case of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*”

Joseph Kestner explores the idea that *Frankenstein* is narcissistic not only in nature, but perhaps more importantly, in structure. The basis for this claim is the “story within a story” element used by Shelley to represent the mirroring of the characters.

Walton’s narrative begins the process. The letters he writes to his sister are filled with references to himself, his wants and his desires. The reason for his journey to the pole is allegedly for the benefit of mankind, but his true motivation is selfishness. He complains of not having a friend. When he takes Victor on board his ship, he recognizes him as the Narcissistic Other, the perfect friend because he *is* like him. Both men have a history of isolating themselves and fleeing from intimacy.

Shelley places Victor’s story within that of Walton’s, adding another frame to the mirror. Victor’s discovery of the secret of life is a mirror image of Walton’s search for the route to the pole. Each exhibits megalomaniacal tendencies, one of the characteristics of a narcissist. They are driven by their huge egos to attempt what others would deem impossible. Victor blames his failure to create a female counterpart for the monster on his conscience. Freud, however, would blame it on a narcissist’s homosexual tendency. If he doesn’t make the woman, he—in the form of his Other Self—avoids intimacy with the woman.

Another layer of narrative is added when Frankenstein meets his creature and hears his story. Because the monster is a mirror of Victor, he is listening to his own tale. The final frame to this multi-layered mirror was added later by Mary Shelley when she wrote her “Author’s Introduction.” (Kestner).
Principal Critics

Anne K. Mellor is a Distinguished Professor of English and Women’s Studies at UCLA. She is a recognized expert on eighteenth and nineteenth century British literature, women’s writing, feminist theory, and the visual arts, and is frequently quoted in many of the critical essays written about Mary Shelley and *Frankenstein*. She is the author of *Mary Shelley: Her Fiction, Her Life, Her Monsters*; as well as co-editor of *The Other Mary Shelley*. She is currently teaching four graduate-level English courses at UCLA (Mellor).

Betty T. Bennett (1935-2006) was a Distinguished Professor of Literature and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at American University. She won the Keats-Shelley Association of America-American Distinguished Scholar Award in 1992. She edited and published *The Letters of Mary Shelley* in three volumes. The books contain nearly 1,300 letters, over 500 of which had never been published. While researching for the books, Betty traveled over 158,000 miles across three continents, uncovering 12 previously unknown letters in an obscure archive in Sydney. Her work brought her into intimate contact with a side of Mary Shelley that few people had seen (Bennett).

Charles E. Robinson is a professor of English at the University of Delaware. He is the editor of *Mary Shelley: Collected Tales and Stories*; as well as co-editor (with Betty T. Bennett) of *The Mary Shelley Reader* and editor of *Mary Shelley’s Prosperine and Midas*. He published the two-volume edition of the manuscripts of *The Frankenstein Notebooks*. In October 2006, he appeared in the History Channel program, “Decoding the Past: In Search of the Real Frankenstein” as an internationally recognized expert on *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. He offers courses at the University of Delaware in Newark, on the Romantics, especially Byron and the two Shelleys (Robinson).
Stuart Curran, Vartan Gregorian Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, has spent the last three decades writing about Percy and Mary Shelley, as well as teaching university courses on the Shelleys and Godwins. He has completed a hypertext edition of *Frankenstein*, including intellectual and literary contexts and criticisms in the project. He serves as President of the Keats-Shelley Association of America and is editing 4 volumes of the Johns Hopkins University Press edition of Shelley (Curran).
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