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# Frankenstein: A Seminal Work of Modern Literature

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# **Frankenstein: A Seminal Work of Modern Literature**

*A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment*

*of the Requirements for the Degree of*

*Master of Liberal Studies*

*by*

*Traci K. Damron*

*May, 2013*

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## INTRODUCTION

Each literary period is a reinterpretation of the one before. There may be a synthesis of the previous themes and ideals, or a rebellion against them, but the preceding works invariably inform and influence new authors. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*, originally published in 1818 with a second edition published in 1831, although assigned to the Romantic period of literature (1798-1832), surpasses her contemporaries by its complexity of themes, scientific and religious pragmatism, as well as social commentaries embedded deep within. Peter Childs, Professor of Modern English Literature at the University of Gloucestershire, in his work entitled *Modernism*, describes the new landscape in which *Frankenstein* finds itself: "The elements of religious skepticism, deep introspection, philosophical speculation, loss of faith and cultural exhaustion all exemplify the preoccupations of Modernist writing" (5). While I do recognize that the novel is rightly assigned to the Romantic period of literature and am not attempting to wholly disprove that categorization, upon further detailed analysis, this paper will prove that many of the various aspects required for a piece to be considered part of Modern literature (1880-1950 and beyond) are undeniably present within *Frankenstein*. The original 1818 text will be used throughout this essay as I feel it is a true representation of the author's ideas and intent.

I will first briefly examine the life of Mary Shelley - particularly the personal lives and ideologies of those with whom she was closest. It is here that we will discover how her mother and father's renowned preoccupation with social inequality as well as atheism would influence her own beliefs and in turn, her novel. Likewise, Shelley's closest friends and own husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, also had a tremendous influence upon her concerns and be-

liefs where the relationship with her father, William Godwin, left off. By looking at the people with whom she was closest, we can see how this young lady was incorporating new ideas, philosophies, and beliefs which were on the fringes of society into her novel.

The year was 1816. It was “a wet, ungenial summer, and incessant rain often confined [Mary and her friends] for days to the house” (Shelley ix). An eighteen year old Mary Godwin sat captivated by the conversations between her friends and the passionate poet she adored regarding the latest scientific experiments upon cadavers and what they might mean philosophically in terms of the limitations of science. They specifically discussed Dr. Darwin and galvanism. Upon the conclusion of this debate, a challenge was issued to each person present to write a ghastly tale. Mary initially struggled and then, as if in a waking dream, the Creature took shape in her imagination borne from the curiosities of her friends’ speculations. As Mary herself explained in the 1831 second edition: “Invention consists in the capacity of seizing on the capabilities of a subject and in the power of moulding and fashioning ideas suggested by it” (Shelley x). Shelley was soon to introduce a reanimated creature that would embody the troubling implications of what such success might mean for the world.

We will take a closer look at the superstitious beliefs of the early 1800’s and how they not only influenced Mary Shelley to write in this strain of fiction but also would support and propel the popularity of such a book. Shelley artfully mixes the audience’s popular fears of goblins and ghouls with the new science of the times to create a masterful work of speculative fiction which steps confidently into the river leading to science fiction and onward toward Modern literature. Samuel Vasbinder, in his book entitled *Scientific Attitudes in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*, explains that the novel is not the “fabrication of a young and impres-

sionable girl making up a story cut from the whole cloth of a nightmare” but (similar to the strain of all speculative fiction) “was an extrapolation of known facts moved into unknown and unproven areas” (82). It is for this reason, and many others, as I will show, that the chains binding Mary Shelley’s novel solely to the Romantic era are broken. Childs goes on to say, “Modernist texts often focus on social, spiritual, or personal collapse and subsume history under mythology and symbolism” (19). Mary Shelley’s novel, which symbolically incorporates mythology, historical alchemists and occultists as well as Christianity, exemplifies social, spiritual, and personal collapse as we will closely examine.

While the Romantic hero would be preoccupied with rebellion against oppressive expectations regarding morality, Mary Shelley takes the reader into an even darker realm. Homosexual undertones and incestuous yearnings are prevalent within her novel - both of which are much more at home in the Modern period of literature than the Romantic. Not only were these flatly regarded as improper subjects but to be incorporated into a novel by a woman was unheard of. Mary Shelley had the same boldness of thought as her accomplished parents whose publications and reputations challenged the workings and limitations of society. This leads even further into another Modern theme: disenchantment with society. Mary Shelley included social commentary about imperialism and the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed which a closer look at Victor Frankenstein and his Creature will reveal. And finally, we will find textual evidence to support the modern theme of the isolation and emptiness of the individual in the characters of Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the Creature. While many of the scholars in this paper come from different schools of thought (Marxist, feminist, Freudian, among others), I am not attempting to



marry those interpretations but rather to let them stand individually to represent Modern theory and ideation.

Susan Tyler Hitchcock acknowledges the novel's Modern elements in *Frankenstein: A Cultural History*:

To the centrally human quandary between risk and obedience, Frankenstein adds one more crucial, haunting, modern twist. What if there is no divine source for the rules, no final moral answer, no driving authority to judge, punish, or reward, to create, destroy, or control? In short, what if there is no God? The dark possibility of a godless world permeates the novel and carries through every retelling. As if to embody the answer, a monster looms into view. Despite his promise of self-immolation at the end of Mary Shelley's novel - and despite the gruesome deaths he has suffered, over and over, in interpretations, adaptations, spin-offs, and sequels of the novel ever since, this monster lives on, perpetually spawning meaning, an obscene caricature and a god for modern times. (6)

*Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* should be considered one of the seminal works of Modern literature as evidenced through detailed analysis of the novel specifically regarding the following Modern literary themes: scientific advancements as speculative fiction, science vs. religion, the realm of the unconscious and darker side of human psychology, disillusionment with the workings of the world, as well as the isolation and emptiness of the individual.

## INFLUENCES UPON A YOUNG GIRL: HOW WAKING DREAMS ARE MADE



To establish that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is in fact a seminal work of Modern literature, one must first carefully look at the life of the woman herself. The influences surrounding Mary from her parentage through her husband and close friends contributed to her intellectual curiosities and personal beliefs which broke from traditional viewpoints and socially accepted behaviors of her day. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, died shortly after her birth due to puerperal fever and was revered if not worshipped by Mary all of her life. Her father, William Godwin, although educated at a Presbyterian college for the purpose of becoming a minister, lost his faith altogether and declared himself an atheist; his radical ideals and writings would become an invitation to like-minded individuals throughout Mary's development.

Young Mary enjoyed an education in the arts, politics, history, science, and literature. She had access to her father's extensive library as well as occasions to attend conversations between her father and his associates such as William Wordsworth who was a close friend of Godwin. William Godwin also took his fourteen year old daughter to a series of lectures on Shakespeare by his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge at the Royal Institution (Bennett xiv). Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" would later become a strong influence upon the most famous of her seven novels. Since the age of nine, Mary would sometimes hide underneath the couch to enjoy Coleridge's recorded recitation of his famous poem, an activity

which her notably cruel stepmother would interrupt, adding to the grim memories she had of growing up without her mother (Seymour 58). Mary would later describe the woman she blamed for the destruction of the relationship with her father as “odious” and a “filthy woman” who plagued her father “out of his life” (Mellow 12). The tensions between Mary and her stepmother would result in Godwin sending her to a boarding school for six months and while there she only received one letter a month from her emotionally detached father (Seymour 63-64). This forced independence gave Mary the opportunity to widen her scope of acquaintances. Her correspondence with various friends shows proof of a budding cosmopolitan woman who befriended poets, dramatists, satirists, social reformers and historians such as Lord Byron, Coleridge, John Keats, Sir Walter Scott, William Hazlitt, Lady Sydney Morgan, Edward John Trelawny, Caroline Norton, Thomas Love Peacock, and Washington Irving. “Because of her particular interests, a large number of letters deal in depth with literature, opera, theater, musical entertainments, ballet, recitals, museums, and exhibitions” as well as “observations on living conditions, politics, royalty, customs, travel, finance, and transportation” (Bennett xv).

As a late teenager, Mary would find herself attracted to Percy Shelley, a poet and writer who deeply captivated her and like her father, also held atheist views. In fact, the friends she and Percy Shelley would entertain were themselves counter-culture free thinkers who enjoyed, like Mary, a rather bohemian approach to life rather than being limited by conventional boundaries. By the time Mary was eighteen years old, she was steeped in the daring and usually exclusively masculine mindset that would question established norms and lure audiences into uncharted and arguably offensive territories. That mindset is a dominating force within her first and most successful novel. In fact, many of the conversations be-

tween Mary and her family as well as their guests not only centered around politics and religion but the latest scientific discoveries as well. The novel, *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*, is a natural culmination of the influences on her life and a window inside the mind of a woman who was far beyond the restricting world in which she found herself. Mary Shelley was primed to become the author of what we should consider to be one of the first works of Modern literature.

### ***Mary Wollstonecraft***

Mary Wollstonecraft, author of the renowned feminist treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, died of puerperal fever on September 10, 1797, after having given birth to her daughter, Mary, ten days earlier. This “most ardent advocate of her times for the education and developments of female capacities” (Mellor 1), Wollstonecraft had quite an untraditional approach to her own relationships. She and William Godwin had been married only five months earlier so as to give their daughter, Mary, a respectable name within society. Yet prior to Mary’s birth, Mary Wollstonecraft gave birth to an illegitimate daughter named Fanny who was the offspring of an affair with an American businessman. Shortly after Wollstonecraft’s death, William published a full account of her personal life and writings which, contrary to his intentions, dismayed his audience’s religious sensibilities by mentioning a platonic ménage à trois which she had with painter Henry Fuseli and his wife. In fact, Mary was so infatuated with Henry Fuseli that she at one point proposed that the three of them live together and was flatly rejected. Wollstonecraft’s banishment from his life resulted in two suicide attempts (Mellor 2). It is because of Godwin’s publication that respectable English women found it difficult to declare themselves supporters of Wollstonecraft’s feminist

views. This would be a burden that young Mary Godwin would have to endure: the idolization of her dead mother and “at the same time the social opprobrium and personal costs suffered by any woman who openly espoused the causes of sexual freedom, radical democracy, or women’s rights” (Mellor 4). According to Miranda Seymour in her biography, *Mary Shelley*, Mary was well aware of a particular quote from her mother’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: “[A] great proportion of the misery that wanders, in hideous forms, around the world, is allowed to rise from the negligence of parents” (24). It can be said with great confidence that Mary Wollstonecraft had a direct influence upon both her daughter’s worldview as well as *Frankenstein*. Additionally, one of William and Mary’s favorite books to read before Mary Godwin’s birth was *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (Seymour 27) which would later become one of the three books found by Victor Frankenstein’s Creature with which to educate himself and a sweet homage to Mary Shelley’s father and mother.

William Godwin encouraged Mary to idolize her mother and to “measure herself and others against the heritage of her mother’s ideals...which fostered her own political views” (Bennet xiv). Mary strived to become much like the woman she imagined her mother wanted her to be. At the start of her relationship with Percy Shelley, she took with her a box of her own journals and writings on various topics which she intended for him to read. Sadly, this box was left behind at a hotel in Paris never to be forwarded to their next destination despite Percy’s instructions. “Mary’s first impulse in her new life with the poet Shelley was to establish her own literary credentials, to assert her own voice, and to assume a role as his intellectual companion and equal - the role her mother had advocated for women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*” (Mellor 23). To educate and assert oneself against all odds is not only a feminist virtue but one that is transformative for *Frankenstein’s* Creature. To

question an individual's rights and place within society surfaced in Mary Shelley's own famous novel as we will see in further analysis.

### ***William Godwin***

William Godwin was absolutely worshipped by his young daughter. In the same way that she sought to know her mother through her writings, Mary repeatedly read his political works "deriving much of her vision of an egalitarian social order from his theories of political and social justice" (Bennett xiii). In a letter dated 5 December 1822, Mary tells her friend, Jane Williams, "You have then seen my father. Until I knew Shelley I may justly say that he was my God and I remember many childish instances of the excess of attachment I bore for him" (Bennett 296). Indeed, after suffering the devastating loss of Mary Wollstonecraft, William found himself father to two daughters (one of which was by Wollstonecraft's previous relationship), and was therefore their sole protector and primary influence although he admitted to being ill-prepared for the task.

During Mary's young life, Godwin established himself as the founder of philosophical anarchism. "In his *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) he argued that government is a corrupting force in society, perpetuating dependence and ignorance, but that it will be rendered increasingly unnecessary and powerless by the gradual spread of knowledge" (Philp). Having begun his life studying to be a minister only to arrive at a public declaration of atheism, Godwin's "greatest philosophical supporters were his contemporaries who were attracted to Godwin's intellectual rigour and his radical critique of the social and political order. Many later abandoned him (Coleridge, Wordsworth and Southey) as part of a rising

tide of loyalist reaction, [as well as] Shelley and Byron, for more personal and domestic reasons” (Philp).

It is noted by Mary Shelley in her aforementioned letter to Jane Williams that her relationship with this much-needed and emotionally distant parent was a disappointment: “This is past - all good is past for me, and all feelings except painful ones are far less vivid within me since life has become the solitude for me” (Bennett 296). Her feelings are justified. It seems that being a single father was not William’s strong suit and after a few brief failed engagements, he finally married his next door neighbor who treated Mary and her half-sister terribly. At fifteen, Mary left home to escape the ill-treatment of her stepmother and lived in Scotland. It is therefore no wonder that Mary’s first novel would incorporate the lack of love from a parent as well as the conflict of reason versus religious fundamentals. Both themes can be attributed to her father’s failed parentage and his professional reputation.

### ***Percy Bysshe Shelley***

While living in Scotland for two years to escape her stepmother’s cruelties, Mary became a self-possessed young woman. “When she returned to London, an intellectually awakened and handsome seventeen year old, she found that the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley was a frequent visitor to her father’s house” not only for intellectually stimulating conversation but also because Shelley, an ardent admirer of Godwin, would lend “substantial sums of money” to Mary’s irresponsible father (Wolf xix). Godwin was familiar with Shelley’s superior education at Oxford and early interests in “ancient books of Chemistry and Magic” (Mellor 18). His good friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, commented on Shelley’s preoccupa-

tion with these things: “He discoursed after supper with as much warmth as before on the wonders of chemistry...he would start from his seat at any moment, and seizing the air pump, some magnets, the electrical machine to ascertain by actual experiment the value of some new idea that rushed into his brain” (Smith 46). Shelley went so far as to publish a pamphlet on *The Necessity of Atheism* which resulted in the expulsion from Oxford of himself and Hogg (Mellor 18).

It wouldn't be long afterwards that Mary would find herself deeply infatuated and yearning for the family she had never had in this exciting and passionate young writer. Although Shelley was married, it did not stop him from dining with the Godwins (whom Godwin hosted in hopes of finding a financial patron) and escorting his new love interest to the grave of her mother on a daily basis to read Wollstonecraft's works aloud, hold hands, and speak with Mary. At this point, Shelley had completely disavowed his own wife whom he found to be far less than his intellectual equal and ran off with the exciting young Mary and her stepsister Claire against their father's wishes. When the three returned to England, Mary was pregnant and yet at the same time encouraged by Shelley to have an affair with Hogg; Shelley himself “dreamed of sexual communes” (Wolf xx). “Shelley rationalized his behavior with a philosophy of free love. ‘Love,’ he would write, ‘differs from gold and clay:/ That to divide is not to take away.’ His passions - Mary, liberty, poetry, atheism - meant more to him than his responsibility for an estranged and earthly family” (Hitchcock 17). Godwin was troubled by their affair and the overwhelming nature of their emotional and sexual passion for one another to the point that he forbid Mary to continue in her relationship with this married man. Yet Shelley, who had falsely accused his wife of being pregnant by another man, threatened to commit suicide if he could not be with Mary which only in-



creased her need to never be without him (Mellor 21). It wasn't long before the couple and their way of life attracted the scorn of English society. They essentially banished themselves, along with Mary's sister who satisfied Percy Shelley's "harem psychology" (Mellor 21). The reprobation that their lack of religious beliefs and brazen sexual freedoms had drawn from a scrupulous and judgmental world made it impossible for them to remain in London. They sought refuge in Geneva which serves as the fictional home of Victor Frankenstein in Mary's novel. This rejection by both society and Mary's father, along with the frustration it must have caused, would soon take root in various characters of the *Frankenstein* novel.

### ***Lord Byron***

Mary's sister, Claire, who had recently had a casual affair with the scandalous Lord Byron, was now pregnant. Hoping to continue her affair with Byron, she pushed and was successful in convincing the Shelleys to take solace in the Maison Chapuis on the shore of Lake Léman in Geneva, Switzerland. It is said that Byron, who loved visiting the Shelleys, absolutely loathed Claire because she was no more than a previous casual affair which had resulted in an unwanted pregnancy (Wolf xxi). Byron felt that the world viewed him as "a genius, titled, lascivious, lame" monster and sometimes he agreed (Wolf xxii). This judgment may be due to the fact that he enjoyed a certain notoriety with women which was rumored to extend to men as well. In fact, at this time he was not visiting the Shelleys out of mere friendliness but partly because he, too, had been banished by English society for an affair with his half-sister as well as various handsome younger men. Louis Crompton, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Nebraska and author of the highly acclaimed *Byron and Greek Love*, writes, "Though incest was scandalous enough, the accusation of sod-

omy was far more damning. Byron was publicly insulted and ostracized, the situation becoming so intolerable that within a few weeks he left England for good in an extremely bitter mood” (Compton).

Byron’s own writings such as *The Giaour*, *The Corsair*, and *Parisina*, show elements which break from Romanticism and incorporate a fascination with violence particularly in the case of two men fighting over the same woman (Cantor 90) which is a conflict that arises within *Frankenstein* between the Creature and Victor. “It is this pattern in Byron which struck Mary Shelley, this interweaving of love and hate, romance and war, a pattern in which the aggressive elements tend to predominate” (Cantor 91). While it can be said that Romantics did sometimes find themselves incorporating violence into their writings (particularly for the cause of political revolution), Byron was particularly fascinated with murder and the hate it caused in the aforementioned pieces which have more to do with domestic than political conflicts and moves him beyond the boundaries of Romanticism. In those pieces, a younger man attempts to steal love away from a socially superior man who enacts revenge upon him and in turn, the young man gathers his strength and “lives to exact a terrible vengeance upon the older man and anyone associated with him” (Cantor 90). Taking the cause and effects of violence to a new level was certainly a break from Romanticism and one which may have prompted Mary Shelley to do the same. All three of these works by Byron were published just before Mary Shelley began her work on *Frankenstein*. Lord Byron’s life and work most certainly influenced his young friend. Issues of incestuous yearnings with a half-sister, latent homosexuality, and intense violence between two men (in part motivated by the same love interest between them) would be all be incorporated into Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

### ***John William Polidori***

In the summer of 1816, Lord Byron rented the Villa Diodati which was only a brief distance from the Maison Chapuis accompanied by his traveling companion and physician, John William Polidori. One particularly rainy evening drove the friends indoors. After telling various ghost stories and entertaining themselves with the English anthology of horror tales, *Fantasmagoriana*, Byron suggested they each undertake the task of writing their own ghastly tale for the entertainment of one another. Polidori records in his diary on June 16, 1816, a conversation between Byron and Percy Shelley regarding the most recent scientific as well as medical experiments and “about principles, - whether man was to be thought merely an instrument” (Small 34, 35). Mary, who was struggling to write her own tale, was particularly attentive during this discussion. In the second publication of *Frankenstein* (1831) she gives an account of how their examination of recent discoveries that night sparked the creation of her timeless novel: “Perhaps a corpse would be reanimated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth” (Shelley 168). The young Mary Shelley, with an angry summer storm beating against the windows of the Maison Chapuis, was most certainly on the threshold of a new journey in literature that would question traditional sensibilities as well as challenge religious and philosophical boundaries. From the darkness rose a waking dream that would strike terror into the hearts of countless generations.

## FROM SPECTERS TO SPECULATIVE FICTION

The early 19th century was an exciting time of growth and change in the field of science. Interestingly, new hypotheses and experiments were part of a culture which was very interested in and yet markedly fearful of the supernatural. In *The Early Days of the Nineteenth Century in England (1800-1820)* by William Connor Sydney, the power of supernatural curiosities of the time are reported: "Superstition lived on with amazing vitality in the English heart. Popular credulity had no bounds. The rich consulted astrologers and the poor had recourse to wise men and cunning women. Nothing was too absurd to be credited" (60). Take for instance the story of Johanna Southcott who gained great notoriety as well as a substantial following in London by declaring herself a prophetess of apocalyptic doom. Although illiterate, she made her livelihood from published ravings and trinkets sold to guarantee passage to heaven after the end of the world. At one point, she even went so far as to declare that she was going to give birth to "the Shiloh" (messiah) resulting in the building of a temple in Southwark for herself and her new baby. Yet, no baby was produced and she passed away to the dismay of her followers in December of 1814 (just a year and a half before Shelley was to write *Frankenstein*) with many continuing to declare afterwards that Southcott would be resurrected (Sydney 62-63). Along with the ease of public fascination regarding the unexplained, the English public was also all too willing to believe that places such as a dark avenue held unimaginable terrors in waiting. "Boggles [ghosts], boggarts [mischievous spirits], and hobgoblins [troublesome creatures] were to be met with in every lonely spot. In one parish, the spectre was a black dog which galloped through a certain lane. In another, it was a headless woman who paced a certain garden" (Sydney 71). This was the world in which

Mary found herself. She would have known of these popular stories and the infinite astonishment they drew from the young and old - rich and poor. The time was right for a new approach to horror...one that might chill the blood by using a seemingly possible new science.

One primary influence upon Mary Shelley regarding scientific experimentation was Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802) whom she mentions as an influential source in both the original 1818 publication as well as the 1831 prefaces of her novel. Darwin, the grandfather of Charles Darwin, was a close friend of the Godwin family as well as a “zestful womanizer and an audacious stutterer who was capable of dominating any conversation despite his handicap.” His famous prescription for *pallor et tremor a timore* (paleness and trembling from fear) was, “Opium. Wine. Food. Joy” (Wolf 3-4). Yet, despite his unsavory reputation, Dr. Darwin was beloved and his work often became the subject of conversations in both the Godwin and Shelley homes. Mary Shelley explains Dr. Darwin’s influence upon her novel in the preface of the second edition of 1831:

Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these, various philosophical doctrines were discussed, and among others the nature and principle of life, and whether there was any possibility of its ever being discovered or communicated. They talked of the experiments of Dr. Darwin (I speak not of what the Doctor really did, or said that he did, but, as more to my purpose, of what was spoken of as having been done by him), who preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion. (x)

For instance, one of Dr. Darwin's famous works published in 1803, *The Temple of Nature*, takes issue with critics who claim that life cannot be derived from dying or decaying matter. In that the Shelleys were familiar with his work, it follows that this would have fed into the imagination that formed Mary's Creature.

Christopher Smith, in his article, "A Strand of Vermicelli: Dr. Darwin's Part in the Creation of Frankenstein's Monster", cites Darwin's observations of "spontaneous vitality" and the "primordium of life" to be found in decomposing animal or vegetable substances in which he argues that "there is therefore no absurdity in believing that the the most simple animals and vegetables can be produced by the congress of the parts of decomposing organic matter" (49). Smith concludes that by having Darwin's foundational theories embedded in *Frankenstein*, "This, then, is the final irony: from Erasmus Darwin's forward-looking optimism came one of the earliest warnings against being swept away by the onrush of nineteenth, twentieth, and now twenty-first century science" and that the novel itself "is at root, like so much later science fiction, ultimately anti-science" (52).

Luigi Galvani (1737-1798) was another popular scientist whose experiments contributed to the creativity of Mary Shelley and therefore the fictional actions of Victor Frankenstein within her novel. The story is that on a particularly stormy evening, an electrical storm outside of Galvani's lab seemed to transfer through the air to the scissors that Galvani used on a dead frog; each time the scissors touched the frog, its legs would twitch. At a later time, his assistant touched the lumbar nerve of another specimen while an electric generator was on in the same room that seemed to excite molecules in the air which transferred through the scalpel of the assistant and caused a physical reaction in the frog. "Intrigued by these coincidences, Galvani embarked on a new series of experiments. He found no rela-

tionship between these external forces and the dead frogs' leg movement, but he came to an astounding conclusion: electrical energy was intrinsic to biological matter" and that the metal tools used actually conducted that energy to simulate life ("Galvani"). Due to the popularity of his discoveries, "galvanism" was a common word in Mary's time as it referred to the use of electricity to excite the nerves of otherwise lifeless matter. Mary uses the term in her 1831 preface: "Perhaps a corpse would be re-animated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth" (Shelley xi).

Mary purposefully emphasized the importance of electricity through lightning and its effect on Victor Frankenstein's imagination as a source of life. Victor recounts his memory of watching "a stream of fire" from the sky transform a beautiful oak tree on his family's property into nothing but a stump. Victor goes on to say, "On this occasion a man of great research in natural philosophy was with us, and, excited by this catastrophe, he entered on the subject of electricity and galvanism, which was at once new and astonishing to me" (Shelley 26-27).

To take the concept of galvanism one step further, another notorious scientist delved into the secrets of nature with horrific disregard for medical ethics. His name was Giovanni Aldini (1762-1834). Aldini took Galvani's experiments with frogs one step further applying electricity directly to the muscles and nerves of animals as well as human corpses. His own account of electric experiments on the human form sound eerily like the same motivations that controlled Victor Frankenstein: "Convey an energetic fluid to the seat of all sensations; distribute its force throughout the different parts of the nervous and muscular systems; *produce, reanimate and, so to speak, control the vital forces*: this is the object of my research, this is

the advantage that I intend to collect from the theory of galvanism” (Parent 580). In 1802, Aldini made a public spectacle of his experiments using three recently decapitated criminals and “with the help of several physicians, proceeded to apply galvanism to various parts of the bodies of three criminals...at Bologna’s Palace of Justice where the criminals had just been sacrificed” (Parent 580). André Parent goes on to tell the tale of Aldini’s most famous experiment in 1803 on the freshly hanged corpse of George Foster, a 26 year old Londoner who had drowned his wife and child in the Paddington Canal.

The results were dramatic: when the rods were applied to Foster’s mouth and ear, Aldini mentioned that “the jaw began to quiver, the adjoining muscles were horribly contorted, and the left eye actually opened.” When one rod was moved to touch the rectum, the whole body convulsed: indeed, the movements were “so much increased as almost to give an appearance of reanimation.” Aldini’s demonstration was reported in detail in the London newspaper *The Times* (22 January 1803) and made a strong and enduring impression on the mind of scientists and ordinary people alike; many began to believe that electricity might be the long-sought vital force. (581)

It is indisputable that Mary Shelley took the Faustian reputation of Aldini along with his methods of experimentation as a model for Victor Frankenstein’s ambition and profane investigation into the secrets of nature. All three of the aforementioned scientists were not only pronounced influences on Shelley as well as English society but also individually represented the new science of the 19th century. It was now up to Mary to fictionalize all of them into one man: Victor Frankenstein.



One established tenet of Modern literature is that the author, regarded as an “influential creative artist”, carries an expectation of innovation and experiment within their writing (Shiach 6). To this end, Mary Shelley created a masterful work of speculative fiction, a term that, according to Samuel Vasbinder in his book *Scientific Attitudes in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*, is “more comprehensive than the earlier well-known ‘science-fiction.’” The term “speculative fiction” was coined by Robert A. Heinlein during an address he presented at the 1933 World Science Fiction Convention. “Speculative fiction” refers to “those works that have a scientific or pseudo-scientific base, whose stories are set in hypothetical, future societies or which make use of newly created, technological advances that cause radical change or distress in the environment into which they are introduced.” And, as Vasbinder goes on to say, “Mary Shelley preserves a strong scientific tone at the very outset in the Arctic letters of the English scientist, Robert Walton” which is continued throughout the novel (2-3). Robert Walton is attempting to navigate a new route to the Arctic and writes about his concerns to his sister, Margaret Saville. He speaks of the “wonderous power that attracts the needle” (Shelley 1) which is symbolic of the natural inclination of mankind to seek new sources of knowledge and uncharted enterprises. “Speculative fiction” also applies to Victor Frankenstein as his inner compass directs his interests toward the unlikely hypothesis that a living creature can be derived from dead matter. Those “newly created, technological advances” by way of the aforementioned scientists’ work are put into fictional practice by Victor Frankenstein who, in finding success, changes the entire landscape of how the reader might perceive the world if in fact a man could overcome nature and align himself with God. This most certainly is both a “radical change” which causes “distress in [an otherwise ordered] environment” as the Creature is introduced into the world.

In early 2003, Dr. Paul A. Cantor, chaired professor of English at the University of Virginia and specialist in the Romantics, delivered an address to the President's Council on Bioethics regarding the "intersection of science and literature" by speaking at length about Mary Shelley and *Frankenstein* which he suggested should be considered "one of the most prophetic books ever written":

The basic lesson *Frankenstein* can teach us is this: science can tell us *how* to do something, but it cannot tell us whether we *should* do it. To explore that question, we must step outside the narrow range of science's purely technical questions, and look at the full human context and consequences of what we are doing. To fill in our sense of that context and those consequences, literature can come to the aid of science. No matter how imaginative science itself can be - and recall that Shelley does see Frankenstein as fired up by his imagination - literature is better at imagining the human things. (Hitchcock 303)

This form of speculative fiction brings the novel more closely in line with the modern genre of science fiction. By creating a fictional novel rooted in the new science of her times, Mary Shelley was thematically placing *Frankenstein* into a catalogue of innovation which represented the changes of her time and a world of possibilities yet unknown.

## SCIENCE VS. RELIGION

In the works of modernity, there is often a thematic clash between science and religion - a clash which was particularly prevalent toward the end of the nineteenth century because of Darwinism and its dismantling of the people's faith in the God of the Book of Genesis (Childs 480). Several decades earlier, Mary Shelley was already incorporating a major character into her story who would directly challenge the comfortable certainties of religion. "In his attempt to override evolutionary development and to create a new species *sui generis*, Victor Frankenstein becomes a parodic perpetrator of the orthodox creationist theory. On the one hand, he denies the unique power of God to create organic life. At the same time he confirms the capacity of a single creator to originate a new species [yet] only creates a monster" (Mellor 101). The generation of a living being from dead matter is approached in a purely scientific and empirical manner. There is no room for religion in Victor's approach. He takes his studies of the natural world, its philosophers, and the latest experiments such as galvanism, to create life. The comfortable certainties of religion are dashed against the rocky shores of science. By Victor's example, there is no longer just one benevolent God who bestows life and endows it with a soul to be guided and cared for throughout its experiences on earth. His success calls into question the natural order of religion. Victor Frankenstein, in fact, has enacted the most pronounced form of blasphemy which flies in the face of religion: he has equated himself with God.

Consider the subtitle of the novel, *The Modern Prometheus*. In examining the use of Mary Shelley's chosen subtitle, one must look first at the myth of Prometheus but also at the outcome of his actions not only in terms of his own suffering but in regard to the lesson

Shelley intended to teach her audience. The parallels between the two stories are apparent. Like Prometheus, Victor Frankenstein has created a human creature from raw materials (clay by Prometheus and dead matter by Victor). And there is also the obvious personal pain that comes from having defied the gods in both of these stories: Prometheus is chained to a rock to have his liver pecked from his body by an eagle on a daily basis while Victor brings unremitting anguish to himself through the Creature's murder of four dear family members. This parallel demonstrates a prominent theme of modern literature which is the dangers of the pursuit of knowledge – particularly the usurping of God through scientific endeavors/technology. Victor draws a direct parallel to foreshadow his Promethean fate by the allusion to clay as he describes his methods in preparing to create a living human being: "Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil, as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave, or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay?" (Shelley 33). Victor uses scientific knowledge and speculative experimentation to achieve what only God is allowed to do: bestow life. Like Prometheus, Victor has ventured into a realm which is off-limits to humanity. While one may call into question the "overreaching" theme which seems to make the novel quintessentially Romantic, Mary Shelley is in fact offering a critique of that theme because of the lack of achievement in both Robert Walton (who gives up on his quest due to Frankenstein's warning) and Victor's own abomination. "By questioning the Promethean politics of 'The Ancient Mariner', Shelley may hope to break the [Romantic] cycle that keeps narrators repeating the same old story of the exceptional" (Fisch 189). Although the reader yearns to see the outcome of this endeavor, Shelley uses the Promethean allusion to warn that Victor, in stealing divine knowledge, will suffer tremendous torture for willfully defying the natural order established in a world governed by God.

As outlined previously, Mary Shelley was surrounded by atheists; not only her father but her husband and friends all had an intense influence upon her own spiritual beliefs. Although there is no definitive statement on her part regarding her lack of belief in God, considering her parentage and influences, one can confidently analyze *Frankenstein* to prove that she was an atheist. In the very moment that the Creature is “born” there is a clear encroachment on the validity of Christianity and God within the novel. Victor Frankenstein, through the use of science, attacks and conquers thousands of years of belief that only God can create a human life. And if, like Satan’s arrogant attempt within the Bible, there is equality to be found between man and God, then it could be said that Victor’s “son” is in one sense an antichrist figure of the novel by the fact that in one singular moment his success drains religion of its established power. The Creature’s inability to thrive should not be seen as a nod to the necessity of God or religion but rather simply the fallibility of man. In fact, the Creature has a full awareness of God from reading *Paradise Lost* before he proceeds to murder Victor’s family and haunt his thoughts so it follows that the benevolent being the Creature reads about is, to him, nothing more than a fictional character - devoid of power. “It moved every feeling of wonder and awe, that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting” (Shelley 90). God is certainly not someone who guides and directs the Creature’s dealings with others in terms of love and acceptance. Like his own creator, Victor Frankenstein, God is not a being worthy of his admiration. He equates himself with Satan and therefore sees himself as a being rejected and unworthy of love. The only real friendship and love he witnesses is from afar - in the behavior of human beings - not the God of *Paradise Lost*. If Mary Shelley had wanted to present the positive at-

tributes of religion, she might have had the Creature find the Bible or any other treatise that unequivocally identifies with the benevolent qualities of God.

This poignant attack reverberates far beyond *Frankenstein* and into modern thought. Dr. Leon Surette, explains in his book entitled *The Birth of Modernism*, “Wagner, Nietzsche, Freud, Shaw, Mead, Blavatsky, Kandinsky, Marx, and Bertrand Russell agreed on very little, but they were of one mind on the bankruptcy of Christianity. Comtean positivists claimed to have a science and methodology which exposed all religious beliefs as mere superstition” (256). Yet another attack on religion by Shelley consists of the use of ceremonial magic employed by Victor Frankenstein. Ceremonial magic is “the attempt by a specially trained person to gain control over aspects of the environment such as weather or disease...or other conditions on the human plan normally impossible to control by ordinary means [which must be] obtained by paranormal means” (Vasbinder 52). This dabbling in the occult is mentioned briefly by Victor as he comments on the initial influences (namely Agrippa and Albertus) upon his intellect and his obsession with finding the primary cause of life:

My dreams were therefore undisturbed by reality; and I entered with the greatest diligence in the search of the philosopher’s stone and the elixir of life. But the latter obtained my most undivided attention: wealth was an inferior object; but what glory would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death! Nor were these my only visions. The raising of ghosts or devils was a promise liberally accorded by my favourite authors; the fulfillment of which I most eagerly sought; and if my incantations were always unsuccessful, I attrib-

uted the failure rather to my own inexperience and mistake, than to want of skill or fidelity in my instructors. (Shelley 23)

It is the influence of Victor's father and his continued scientific education that makes this interest in the supernatural "raising of the dead" only a brief interlude. According to Morag Shiach in *The Modernist Novel*, Modernism must include an "emphasis on the power and the complexity of the momentary or evanescent experience" (Shiach 7). Mary Shelley provides this moment to her reader in the form of a powerful flash of lightning. Victor rejects all previous notions upon observing lightning's destruction of a tree; his father demonstrates the power of electricity with a wire and string which "drew down that fluid from the clouds. This last stroke completed the overthrow of Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, and Paracelsus, who had so long reigned the lords of my imagination" (Shelley 24). The new science of Shelley's time would now be introduced in the novel through the rejection of these old philosophers and their sorcery in favor of a systematic approach: careful study of chemistry and intricate instruments of science are the source of Victor's power to create life. The author also makes a wise choice in sending Victor to the University of Ingolstadt which was popular during her time for its "innovative attitudes and was considered a 'center for science'" (Vasbinder 69). In fact, during Professor Waldman's first lecture on chemistry, religion is dashed against the rocky shores of scientific discovery:

[The modern masters of chemistry], whose hands seem only made to dabble in dirt, and their eyes to pour over the microscope or crucible, have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew how she works in her hiding places. They ascend into the heavens; they have

discovered how the blood circulates and the nature of the air we breathe.

They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its shadows. (28-29)

Nature, it seems, has no real secrets; the realm of the creation of all things can be decoded and mimicked by mankind. Peter Booker explains in his chapter entitled “Early Modernism” that Modern literature carries with it a “fascination with the unknown” (Shiach 36). Shelley here reiterates that empirical data and scientific methods are paramount if one is to find the source of life and equate oneself to God. This lights a fire within Victor that cannot be extinguished until he has found success in his endeavors.

Yet in spite of Victor’s astounding ability to scientifically generate life, he has not perfected God’s work but rather created a monstrosity indicative of his own mental state and the fallibility of such human endeavors - a fallibility which again puts science and religion at odds with one another. The source of his “materials” for this experimentation come from charnel houses and graveyards which speaks to the reputation of science having no regard for a spirit or soul. Victor’s cold detachment in using decomposing organic material and then sewing various parts of different people together to create one being is crass beyond measure in terms of scientific exploitation of the natural world and the order of religious values. This disregard also prompts the reader to ask, “Wherein does the soul reside? Are we simply an animated creature ourselves or do we possess a soul? If the latter, where might the soul enter a reanimated body and of whose soul would it consist if, like the Creature, it were made of many?” Again, science complicates the comfortable certainties of re-



ligion. “Victor Frankenstein became the modern Prometheus...overthrowing the established, sacred order of both earth and heaven. At that moment he transgressed against nature” (Mellor 102). Peter Childs explains in *Modernism* that in Modernist novels “the theological search for God had been replaced by the epistemological quest for self-knowledge; enlightenment was not to be found in Christianity or in society but in the self, in individual subjective consciousness” (54). This is certainly what Victor is intending. Mary Shelley is opening the door to the possibility that “God is Dead” (a pronouncement made by Nietzsche). “Modernism is the first secular literature in which natural selection replaced God’s ordering of creation and a human will to power eclipsed the divine will” (Childs 57).

If we now move Victor into the role of playing God, then it follows that the Creature is his Adam and much like him, the Creature is rejected and sent into the world without a direct relationship and love of a Father. Fittingly, the Creature then educates himself with only four books - one of which is Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Mary Shelley makes it clear that her conflict between religion and science is borne from this *Paradise Lost* quote (taken from Frankenstein’s epigraph): “Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay/ To mould me Man, did I solicit thee/ From darkness to promote me?” Victor may have brought physical life to the Creature but this new species lacks any guidance from his maker in terms of his purpose and place in the world. Hence, while aligning himself with Adam, the Creature also starts to consider that he is much like an envious Satan while spying on the simple beauty of the relationships of others. “[Adam] was allowed to converse with, and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as a fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me” (Shelley 90).

Leonard Wolf in *An Annotated Frankenstein* sheds further light on the full rejection of God by the Creature. After being attacked out of fear by the DeLacey family whom he has helped and admired from the shadows, the Creature sets fire to the DeLacey's cottage which represents "an initiation rite into an unknown religion" – one that rejects the God in which both Victor Frankenstein and the DeLaceys believed because of their atrocious cruelty toward him. He recognizes himself at this moment as a godless creature of nature – "primordial, atavistic, cruel" (200). This point of view invites the reader to question whether or not Satan is a sympathetic character and whether God's judgment and rejection of Adam and Satan was perhaps not so benevolent after all. And what would happen, if like the fictional character of Victor Frankenstein, man could create for himself the role of God through science? The ethical struggle of science rises to the surface: if we have the ability to do something, the question then becomes should we? Mary Shelley is masterfully calling into question the foundations of both religion and science.

In the influential *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, the authors lay forth a framework of Modern literature which includes "cataclysmic upheavals of culture, those fundamental convulsions of the creative human spirit that seem to topple the most solid and substantial of our beliefs and assumptions" (Shiach 6). This again breaks the novel from its mould of Romanticism: "In assuming that he [Victor] can create a perfect species by chemical means, Frankenstein defies a central tenet of Romantic poetic ideology: that the creative imagination must work spontaneously, unconsciously, and above all organically, creating forms that are themselves organic heterocosms" (Mellor 102). If Romantics would hope for the elevation of society through their endeavors, then it follows that Victor Frankenstein's abomination is a pragmatic and realistic critique of Romantic ideology. This is key

to understanding how one might regard *Frankenstein* to be a Modern novel in that old theories are dashed and replaced with the new. It is this yearning to break free from traditional theory and move into uncharted waters which Mary Shelley supports through the passions of Victor Frankenstein. “While hers was the first novel that attempted to use this science as the basis of a full scale story, the information upon which it is based was not the fabrication of a young girl...hers was an extrapolation of known facts moved into unknown and unproven areas...and there is reason for calling it the first novel of speculative fiction” (Vasbinder 82). Yearning to venture into the unknown to benefit the world is a Romantic trait but failing miserably is not. In that speculative fiction ranges from fantasy through science fiction and onward into the 20th century within utopian/dystopian fiction and post-apocalyptic fiction, it follows that Mary Shelley’s use of new science and the act of thematically putting it in direct conflict with religion most certainly qualifies the novel as breaking away from Romanticism and leading toward the Modern period.

## DARK ASPECTS OF THE PSYCHE

One of the elements of Modern literature is a rebellion against strict forms of morality which is not unusual for the rebellious Romantic hero as well but in the case of *Frankenstein*, this is taken even further to reveal a darker realm of the unconscious. The strict morality of Mary Shelley's England gave rise to the highly emotional language of the Romantics in aspiring to emancipate themselves from social and personal expectations regarding proper behavior. As noted previously, Mary and her family/friends were ideologically and behaviorally on the fringes of acceptable English norms and consequently suffered a rejection from that society. The young author seems to actually attack their pious nature in defense of herself and her friends. Literarily, the Romantic period this group found themselves in was sparked by the French Revolution of 1789 as well as the Industrial Revolution which caused a destruction of the agrarian lifestyle as well as political and social disenchantment. These events of course impacted the imagination of the poets of the period who wrote in response to these changes and whose focus was to incorporate feeling and imagination back into an otherwise grey, mechanistic, seemingly hopeless world. The celebration of beauty in everyday life, nature, and in relationships (particularly amongst the middle class) is evident in the literature of the time. Yet, what is not common for classic Romanticism and which blasts straight through the Victorian prudishness that followed is a darker realm of human psychology and Modernism embedded in *Frankenstein* in the form of incestuous yearnings and what many of the time would have regarded as sexual perversion in the form of homosexual undertones. There is great textual support on both of these points which shows the novel to be much more at home in the Modern period of literature than the Romantic.

### ***Homosexuality***

At the start of the novel, the reader is introduced to Robert Walton who is embarking for the momentous task of navigating a new route to the North Pole with only a small crew of men. This daring task is reported in the letters he writes to his sister, Margaret, assuring her of his safety and explaining a passionate curiosity that he says can only be satiated by the success of this unprecedented journey. It is interesting to note that he has no female companion at all and therefore directs all reports of his thoughts to his sister solely. In fact, he is, as he says, “completely devoted” to her and never makes mention of having ever enjoyed the company of women - which is curious since most of his first letter covers his personal history up to that point. When Walton does finally grow weary of having no one to share his accomplishments with, he doesn't yearn for a female companion but rather the friendship of a man: “You may deem me romantic, my dear sister, but I bitterly feel the want of a friend. I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own, to approve or amend my plans. How would such a friend repair the faults of your poor brother!” (Shelley 10). This description is voicing want of a particular sort of male companion as logically a woman would naturally never be allowed as a crew member. Robert goes on to assess the different men on the ship whom he commends but still finds no foundation for engaging personally. They are beneath him in ambition and station so he therefore finds no use for their friendship. Mary Shelley here seems to be incorporating her own emotionally distant father into the story. Robert Walton, who is physically and emotionally removed from all who love him, pursues his own endeavors and remains void of any yearning for female companionship aside from the warm memories of his own sister. There is a complete absence in Robert's letters of any

relationship with a woman either in terms of a love interest left behind or romantic hopes for the future. It is also interesting to note that Robert's sister, Margaret Saville, has the same initials as Mary Shelley; perhaps a deep need to understand and have conversation with the ambitious male subconsciously revealed itself in her novel.

Symbolically, Robert's inability to interact with the world and emotional impotence is given through his ship becoming frozen in the Arctic ice. At this point in the novel, even the letters he has written may never be seen by anyone but himself. He is absolutely isolated by his own hubris. According to G.S. Frazier in his book entitled, *The Modern Writer and His World*, one technique within Modern literature is that of "telling the story from the point of view of some observer who is not necessarily a main participant in the story; but this observer's curiosity, and his success or failure in satisfying it, may nevertheless become the main theme" (25). The partnership Robert Walton yearns for is not provided until the appearance of Victor Frankenstein on the vast icy plains whom he brings aboard and attentively nurses back to health. Robert wraps him in blankets, provides a place next to the fire as well as warm soup, and even moves Victor into his personal cabin which is a kindness repaid by "a beam of benevolence and sweetness that [Walton] never saw equaled" (Shelley 15). Upon reviving Victor, Robert expresses his relief in having found the friendship he had so longed for and uses additional doting descriptions: "My affections for my guest increase every day", "...his countenance...touched me to the heart", "...no one can feel more deeply than he does the beauties of nature", "he will be like a celestial spirit, that has a halo around him", and "divine wanderer" (Shelley 16-17). Robert attentively recounts every detail of the fateful story to his sister (which is the bulk of the novel) and is faithfully by Victor's side

when he has exhausted his account and dies. Robert is the first man in the story who sets aside his own ambitions to tend upon Victor Frankenstein's wants and needs.

This kind of companionship, with its homosexual undertones, is not the only one of its sort within the novel. One must consider the unusually attentive relationship between Victor and his lifelong friend, Henry Clerval, who is given feminine characteristics: "On the eve of Frankenstein's departure for the university, his relationship with Clerval seems more passionate than friendly: 'We sat late. We could not tear ourselves away from each other...'" When Frankenstein becomes ill, Clerval nurses him: 'He [Clerval] knew that I could not have a more kind and attentive nurse than himself'" (Ketterer 50). This should be curious to the reader as it is clear on two occasions in the novel the exceptional difficulty Henry has in convincing his father to allow him a higher education (mainly for financial reasons). Henry is finally able to follow Victor to the University of Ingolstadt. Yet, with all of these struggles, both personally and financially, to attend the university, Henry devotes himself to Victor and completely neglects his own studies: "Dearest Clerval," exclaimed I, "how kind, how very good you are to me. This whole winter, instead of being spent in study, as you promised yourself, has been consumed in my sick room" (Shelley 40). Henry continues to ignore his own education at the university by attending to Victor. After he has regained his health, Henry continues to take care of him by removing all instruments of his experiments because of the grief they cause Victor at just the sight of them. He also takes time to rearrange his apartment so that it no longer displays the laboratory setting Victor had transformed it into. Henry's devotion to his friend did not go unnoticed: "Study had before secluded me from the intercourse of my fellow-creatures, and rendered me unsocial; but Clerval called forth the better feelings of my heart; he again taught me to love the aspect of nature, and the

cheerful faces of children. Excellent friend! How sincerely did you love me, and endeavor to elevate my mind until it was on a level with your own” (Shelley 45). The time before returning to Geneva for Henry and Victor was spent with long walks together through nature and Henry’s recitations of Victor’s favorite poems or tales of “wonderful fancy and passion” in which Henry “exerted himself” to amuse Victor (Shelley 45-46). Later in the novel, Victor comments on his travels to London where “Clerval desired the intercourse of the men of genius and talent who flourished at this time” and even makes this same comment a second time as they ventured further into the English countryside saying, “[Clerval’s] mind expanded in the company of men of talent” and declared in his contentment that he could pass his entire life there with these new acquaintances (115). There is no mention of a female companion for his character. After months of leisurely travels, Victor is redirected to his fiancé only through the Creature’s sad murder of Henry Clerval which causes Victor great despair and physical illness. It would seem that his close friendship with Clerval had for many months taken precedence over his relationship with Elizabeth.

The third example of homosexual undertones throughout *Frankenstein* is to be found in the actual creation of the Monster. Although the Romantic period conjures up notions of pronounced individualism and emotional abandon, the homosexual community was persecuted and rejected (even sometimes exiled) by English society, much like Mary Shelley’s friend, Lord Byron, and within her novel, like the public reaction to the Creature. Consider the implication of creating life without the means of sexual procreation with a female in Victor’s genesis of the Creature. David Ketterer comments on the perversion of natural order in *Frankenstein’s Creation: The Book, The Monster, and Human Reality*:



In *Frankenstein*, the curse of sexual perversion is pervasive. For example, the image of Victor Frankenstein “pursuing mother nature to her hiding places” has overtones both incestuous and necrophiliac: “I collected bones from charnel houses; and disturbed with profane fingers the tremendous secrets of the human frame.” (47-48)

The only female figure needed by Victor Frankenstein is mother nature herself - a form he intends to deconstruct to his own ends. He, like Robert Walton, has no use for the flesh and blood female. Mary Shelley personifies nature as “mother nature” and then allows her protagonist to violate her for the purpose of furthering his own endeavors. There is no respect to be found here for the female. Victor takes what he needs with emotionless clarity of mind. The only passion he feels is for his own ambitions.

These crimes against the natural order of creating life result specifically in the conception of a male mate for Victor. Instead of living out his life with his life-long companion, Elizabeth, he isolates himself at the University and devotes his full attention to this companion of which he says, “His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!” (Shelley 35). Victor does not use his knowledge to nobly find a recently deceased child to reanimate for the joy of its bereaved parents; he isolates himself, forgoes the natural procreation process, and builds for himself what was intended to be a beautiful man. Victor’s initial rejection of the Creature is not due to the horror of the offense he has committed against nature or God but rather because of the unattractiveness of the final result. “Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time traversing my bed-chamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep” (Shelley 36).

These collective examples of homosexuality in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* are undeniable and must be considered when one takes into account the various house guests that stormy evening of the novel's birth - each of whom practiced his/her own brand of sexual independence. This aggression toward prudish English society is most certainly purposeful on the part of the author in defense of her friends and their lifestyles.

### ***Incestuous Yearnings***

Regarding the issue of incest, there are two instances within the novel which illustrate that point. Once Victor's mother passes, Shelley, who had suffered tremendous loss in her own family, affords Victor references to death such as "evil" and personifies it as "the spoiler" intensifying the emotional reaction to death that Victor must feel and adding to his own motive to overcome that foe. One could also observe that having lost her own mother, Mary Shelley may have had a deep psychological need to draw her close and overcome death within her own imagination. Mary passes this preoccupation with the death of her own mother to Victor Frankenstein who develops a ruinous obsession with his mother's passing in that he is inspired to enact the reanimation of dead matter and regarded her death as "an omen of [his] future misery" (Shelley 25).

Just as Mary felt her father might have blamed her for the death of her mother, the reader is left to wonder if Victor blames Elizabeth for the death of his mother. This is a crime which he feels must be corrected. Victor's motivation and fervor to prove himself successful in overcoming this wrong is to be found in the author's psyche. Mary Shelley's mother suffered a long and painful death. Through the unnatural need to reanimate a dead body sparked by his mother's death, Victor is symbolically yearning to possess his mother in repeatedly choosing this scientific labor over his healthy and very much alive fiancée, Eliza-

beth - a character who never wins the same love and devotion he shows to his mother.

There is no other death in the novel that occurs between Victor's mother's death and his realization that he can bestow life upon dead matter which draws a straight line between cause and effect. At the inception of his project, Victor says, "To examine the cause of life, we must first have recourse to death" (Shelley 31) which he follows by studying the intricacies of decay upon the human frame. With the only death at this point in the novel being his own mother, it can be said that Victor wishes to know exactly what transformation his own mother went through upon her death. In realizing that he holds the secret to life, he then displays a frenzied emotional response as opposed to the calm, calculating, and objective response one would expect from a purely scientific endeavor:

No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success. Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. Pursuing these reflections, I thought, that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time...renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption. (33)

Note the repeated use of words that denote a parental mindset: "would bless me its creator and source", "owe their being to me", "father", and "[my] child." Not only does this reveal the benevolent/god-like mentality of Victor but in that the words chosen are parental in nature, this also suggests that he is obsessed with the loss of his mother. Although impossible

at that point, his new work allows him the indulgent psychological possibility of being reunited with her. This oedipal affliction with which Victor suffers is the primary cause of his highly emotional as opposed to scientifically objective drive. Shelley has essentially invited the reader to consider the subconscious motivations of her character which is a particularly modern notion as explained by Professor Peter Childs in his book, *Modernism*:

In literature after Freud, many writers felt it was no longer sufficient to present the outsides of personalities and the surfaces of minds, as predominated in realist fiction; instead, the writer needed to explore hidden drives and desires, to deal in what Henry James called 'psychological realism'. For example, according to...Freud...his 'most fundamental' theory was...that the mind attempts to keep constant the quantity of emotion (or affect) within it, which is to say that the individual feels a need to discharge emotions, or, in other words, to express their feelings. In line with this, in many Modernist novels, the inability to purge the mind of particular strong feelings results in madness, murder, and pathological behavior. (51)

The second instance of incest within the novel is more pronounced: the relationship between Victor and Elizabeth. In the 1818 publication of the novel, Elizabeth is explained to be the daughter of Victor's aunt. Victor's father, upon hearing of his sister's death, brings the little girl into his home at her own father's request. She is raised as an equal to the other children in the home and adored by everyone. Victor says of his mother that she had commented on Elizabeth's beauty as a child and loved her dearly. Victor does not hesitate to express his own love of his first cousin: "While I admired her understanding and fancy, I loved to tend on her, as I should on a favourite animal; and I never saw so much grace both of per-

son and mind united in so little pretension” (Shelley 20). He further describes her as “docile”, “good-tempered”, “lively and animated”, “uncommonly affectionate”, with “hazel eyes [possessing] an attractable softness” (20). It is on his mother’s deathbed that their hands are joined while she utters her dying wishes of seeing them married. This particular relationship in the novel was a bit too indecent for pre-Victorian audiences. Under the pressure of having offended her readers, Mary Shelley changed Elizabeth to a rescued orphan discovered by Victor’s mother so that no incestuous relationship would be implied in the 1831 edition. What is interesting about either source, though, is that Elizabeth and Victor never consummate their relationship sexually. During Mary Shelley’s life, sex both for her personally and for women in general was understood to be a choice that could directly result in the death of either the woman, her child, or both. In fact, at the end of the novel, Victor is saved from the consummation of his marriage to Elizabeth by her murder on their wedding night. He scoops her dead body into his arms with great longing after she is dead “signaling again Victor’s most profound erotic desire, a necrophilic and incestuous desire to possess the dead female, the lost mother” (Mellor 121).

While not all literature in the Romantic period was void of sexuality, it was nevertheless unheard of for a woman to speak of such things either explicitly or implied – particularly in regard to homosexuality or incest. The strict moral and sexual code of Mary Shelley’s England would have been feverishly appalled. Of course, this rigidity only grew worse with the Victorians. “Modernist writers attempted to free their characters from social conventions and challenge the propriety, homogeneity, and, as they saw it, absolutism of the social and aesthetic guidelines laid down for them by a previous generation” (Childs 66). Clearly, Mary Shelley was not one to be tamed by the rigid morality of her day. She stood up

for herself and her friends by brazenly writing on topics that were otherwise unmentionable. Peter Faulkner explains in *Modernism* that “the modern [author] has been rendered more self-directed by the influence of psychological investigation, revealing the complexity of the human personality, and of philosophical enquiry” (21). Mary Shelley’s focus on the unconscious and darker realm of the psyche advances the novel from the Romantic period, bypasses all Victorian sensibilities, and propels it into the Modern.

## DISENCHANTMENT WITH THE WORLD

According to *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, the author of a Modernist text must call into question “an entire civilization or culture” which strives to “leave great areas of the past in ruins” (Shiach 6). Mary Shelley, who had strong aversions to imperialism and slavery, symbolically presents a mirror to the culture in which she found herself. Within *Frankenstein*, the Modern literary theme of disenchantment with the world centers around a destruction of the natural and the spiritual by materialistic and mechanistic forces at work. We now revisit pursuing “mother nature to her hiding places” in regard to literally stealing the secrets of nature for the purposes of advancing civilization. It is important to realize that Victor Frankenstein actually places the generation of wealth ahead of his passion to create life: “I entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosopher’s stone and the elixir of life” (Shelley 23). The philosopher’s stone was a belief held by alchemists that if done correctly, any base metals could be transformed into gold – obviously generating wealth and power. The elixir of life, which by Victor’s words comes second to wealth, is the solution that bestows eternal life on whoever possesses it. What is interesting here is that William Godwin wrote about both of these in his novel, *Saint Leon*, in which he bestows both infinite wealth and immortality upon his protagonist. Mary Shelley would of course have been familiar with that work (Wolf 41). This preoccupation with wealth in both literary works symbolizes the tensions between classes:

Victor Frankenstein’s enterprise can be viewed from a Marxist perspective as an attempt to exploit nature or labor in the service of a ruling class. Frankenstein wishes to harness the modes of reproduction in order to become the

acknowledged, revered, and gratefully obeyed father of a new species. His project is thus identical with that of bourgeois capitalism: To exploit nature's resources for both commercial profit and political control. (Mellor 112)

With Victor Frankenstein having come from an upper-middle class family, and with the fact that he undertakes the enterprise of creating and becoming the sole owner of the product of his labors, it follows that the aforementioned analysis is valid. He intends to be the ruler over a new species that would owe its existence to him. Once successful, Victor then tosses the project aside having no regard for its humanity. This is the same imperialistic problem that permeated Mary Shelley's period. Mary was very familiar with the problems of imperialism - particularly regarding the slave trade. The Abolition Act of 1807 attempted to end slavery in England but it was not completely successful. "[William] Godwin devoted a whole section to [the freedom of slaves] in his first draft of *Political Justice*. Shelley and Mary shared Godwin's views" (Seymour 138). All around her, educated people with wealth and power were still carrying forward the commonly repeated inane view that African blacks were derived from monkeys. This allowed the continued dehumanization of an entire people. Mary Shelley was angered to find that abolition did not change people's attitudes which she incorporated into her novel. "In the nameless Creature, whose yellow skin, black hair, and giant limbs allowed her to combine contemporary perceptions of the Easter 'lascars' with the African and West Indian, she examined the





plight of a seemingly non-human being, judged by his looks to be incapable of moral feelings or elevated sentiments” (Seymour 139). In this 1866 political cartoon from *Punch Magazine* by renowned *Alice in Wonderland* illustrator, John Tenniel, we see the working classes of Birmingham (sometimes referred to by locals as Brummagem) being collectively personified as “The Brummagem Frankenstein”. Obviously disgruntled and of unusual strength and stature, the figure glares down upon populist leader John Bright. Tenniel used similar imagery in several later cartoons in which he satirized the imbalance of power between the working classes in both England and Ireland (Hitchcock 109).

This social commentary does not limit itself to Mary Shelley’s world in 1818 but rather extends to all those who have raped and pillaged nature for their own monetary gain - a problem that is rampant in modern society. Anne Mellor continues, “Uninhibited scientific and technological development without a sense of moral responsibility for either the



processes or products of those new modes of production could easily, as in Frankenstein’s case, produce monsters” (114). These “monsters”, as she calls them, are the “colonized or degraded race” who have been dehumanized and often rise up in rebellion against their oppressors. In *Frankenstein: A Cultural History*, Susan Tyler Hitchcock explains how the name “Frankenstein” has been used throughout the last two centuries to satirically symbolize the growing chasm between the rich and poor, free

men and slaves, as well as colonized/ industrialized and agrarian societies: “With a swing away from Romantic idealism toward the conservative and pragmatic, the Victorians doubted that the human intellect could understand, control, replicate, or improve the world, whether that world meant natural phenomena or the social sphere. The Frankenstein myth gave them an icon for mistaken idealisms” (106). Hitchcock goes on to explain how Shelley’s myth bled into the political arena in America in the early 1900’s:



“Many decried the government’s imperialist intentions, seeing them as anathema to republicanism, isolationism, and the American commitment to free peoples everywhere. The November 1, 1900, issue of *Life* magazine included an oversize page that folded out to reveal a cartoon titled “Our Frankenstein” [depicting] a giant crowned monarch...menacing a small Uncle Sam. Civilization is crumbling, and the monster causing such ruin is the embodiment of imperialism, clothed in European monarchic garb but arriving on Uncle Sam’s shore” (113). Whether in the case of taking advantage of the land or its inhabitants, greed for social, political, or monetary gain cannot be sustained by natural resources and will be met with eventual revolt.

This pessimistic criticism of culture and the rise of the voice of the common people is indicative of modern literature. Within the novel itself, Mary Shelley incorporates a pronounced voice of discontentment with society through the character of Victor Frankenstein

in the very act of wanting to create not only a new man but a new species implying that the human race as whole, by his judgment, is deficient. Yet the discontentment with society is not limited to Victor, who in this case represents the greed and corruption of advancement, but also extends to the Creature from an opposing point of view. The stature of the Creature must be considered in that Victor constructs an eight-foot tall hulking figure of a man placing emphasis not on its intellectual prowess as commonly associated with the aristocracy/ruling class (even referring to himself as an “artist”) but rather a purposeful exaggeration of muscular/physical abilities representative of the working class. Notably, the Creature, when given the opportunity to become educated by the peasants he observes from afar and anonymously helps, learns at an exponential rate and articulates his varied emotions with an eloquence superior to Victor. Yet, the Creature in this case sadly represents the downtrodden faction of society who, at the mistreatment and rejection by their leader, is left to make their way in a world that demands submission and offers only scorn to those who refuse. The Creature, like the minorities he represents, rises up against that figure who exercises such abusive power over him and although misguided in his actions (murdering Victor’s family members) still seems to evoke sympathy from an audience who identifies with his abandonment and plight.

One such example of Shelley’s ability to prompt dramatic sympathy from her audience while at the same time illustrating this disillusionment comes in the trial of dear Justine who has been hastily and improperly charged with the murder of Victor’s younger brother, William. It takes very little evidence to charge Justine with the gravely serious crime of murder and her sentencing is swift: “The ballots had been thrown; they were all black, and Justine was condemned” (Shelley 57). Justine says before being hung that she con-

fessed to the crime under duress. “Ever since I was condemned, my confessor has besieged me; he threatened and menaced, until I almost began to think that I was the monster that he said I was. He threatened excommunication and hell fire in my last moments, if I continued obdurate” (Shelley 58). Justine blames her confessor and is manipulated through the use of religion. Victor’s superior pedigree coupled with an unwillingness to rescue poor Justine to protect his own reputation illustrates the divide between classes yet again. Yet another element of Modernism is present here: “The invoking of different and disturbing social milieus and characters” (Shiach 7). Shelley has put the world on trial. The machine, in this case, is a corrupt church, the cruel realities of social order, and the irresponsible judicial meat grinder into which the defenseless peasant has been pushed.

Shelley seems to say that we should not leave nature to serve whatever is drummed up in the imagination but rather that we have a symbiotic relationship and responsibility toward it. “The liberation of the imagination advocated by the Romantic poets was regarded by Mary Shelley as both promiscuous and potentially evil” (Mellor 137). Her skepticism was personified in Victor Frankenstein in his forcing of nature to serve him as he saw fit and his throwing his product away with no regard for it. The backlash of such irresponsibility is therefore reflected in the character of the Creature who becomes morally superior to his creator at least in terms of the natural order of relationships. The Creature says, “I heard of the difference of the sexes; of the birth and growth of children; how the father doted on the smiles of the infant; how all the life and cares of the mother were wrapt up in the precious charge of it; of brother, sister, and all the various relationships which bind one human being to another in mutual bonds” (Shelley 100). The Creature is the personification for Victor Frankenstein of the bond he has broken with nature in pursuing the natural crea-

tion of life as a calculating experiment. The Creature is the eventuality of irresponsible progress. This monster is the child of a rape of Mother Nature by a man thirsting for advancement (both personal and for civilization); he is “demon” and “creature” and “fiend” as Victor calls him and fatally imagines that he is nothing more. The juxtaposition between the calculating, materialistic approach to dissecting nature in Victor’s upper class character and the initial child-like innocence and celebration of simplicity by the Creature’s observations of his poor adopted family works to illustrate the continued conflict between classes. Mary Shelley gives the Creature a voice to represent those who have been used and tossed aside by the imperialistic machine of greed.

## ISOLATION AND EMPTINESS OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The struggle for man to define himself within this world is another theme of modern literature - namely, the isolation and emptiness of the individual. Peter Childs explains in *Modernism*, "Modernists argued that reality was as varied as the individuals who perceived it. While in many ways empowering, for many people such an emphasis on the individual also brought with it feelings of alienation and existential angst after centuries of shared religious certainties" (46). The Creature is not the only character who experiences isolation and loneliness in the novel. Robert Walton, an Arctic seafarer, collects a wandering and exhausted Victor Frankenstein from the vast wasteland of ice and recounts his tale in letters to his sister. It is before Robert finds Victor that he complains of feeling lonely and without a friend in the world. Much like Victor, Robert has pridefully forced his way into a dangerous predicament driven by his own passions for discovery. "Alone though he may feel, his sister will make sense of his 'desire for the company of a man who could sympathize with me'" (Yousef 222). It seems Robert and the Creature share the same need in wanting to share their experiences with another person. Robert Walton receives his wish in the form of Victor Frankenstein who serves as a qualified warning to leave behind his pride and to abandon reckless exploration into the unknown. He is returned to his loneliness and isolation suspended in the Arctic ice with the passing of Victor but has been made the wiser for having encountered him. Robert Walton and, in turn, the reader, has been warned.

The reader is then aligned with the Creature by the latter's universal questions, "Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?" (Shelley 107). As well as having religious implications, these desperate questions speak volumes for the

need of man to find and define himself in an uncertain and troubling world - another aspect of modern literature: the “assault on the stable ego”. As explained by Childs in *Modernism*, D.H. Lawrence’s poem “Phoenix” published in 1932, shows the modern conviction that “much-needed change could only happen through the genuine desire to forge honest relationships and to have the courage to risk the certainties of the past when gambling on the uncertainties of the future”:

Are you willing to be sponged out, erased, cancelled,  
made nothing?

Are you willing to be made nothing?  
dipped into oblivion?

If not, you will never change. (141)

Over a hundred years earlier, these questions could very easily have been asked by the Creature as they are distinctly of his own personal experience. The Creature, having come seemingly from nothing, struggles to know himself and his own place in the world: “It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original æra of my being: all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct. A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard, and smelt, at the same time; and it was, indeed, a long time before I learned to distinguish between the operations of my various senses” (Shelley 70). This idea of having been created from nothing and encountering the world as a brand new species is a satire of the relationship between Adam and God within the book of *Genesis* as well as Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. But the key difference is that the Creature awakes with no guidance at all. Mary Shelley’s atheism surfaces as she places her character in this harshly secular situation with no mentioning of spiritual concerns. “In every respect, the Creature’s experience is rooted in

the harsher, natural world of sensation, hunger, and weather. The Creature wakes without sponsorship, a victim of his sensations, unattended, inexplicably conscious but with no sense of self” (Wolf 145). The Creature complains, “I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing: but, feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept” (Shelley 70).

The Creature’s autobiographical account of his experiences are a catalogue of complaints about human nature and come to a particularly poignant climax when he speaks of the symbolism discovered in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. “Like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect...He was allowed to converse with, and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature: but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me” (Shelley 90). He later rages at Victor about his isolation from all creatures: “Cursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him: but I am solitary and detested”. Therefore, the Creature demands that Victor make him a bride: “no Eve soothed my sorrows or shared my thoughts; I was alone” (Shelley 91). This is a request that Victor initially accepts with some apprehension but then, in disgust with his own actions, rips the experiment apart to the dismay of an infuriated solitary wanderer. Peter Faulkner, in his book entitled *Modernism*, makes an important point regarding the lack of subordinate attitudes in Modern literature: “Accepting one’s place, loyalty to authority, unquestioning obedience, began to break down; patriotism, doing one’s duty, even Christianity, seemed questionable ideas” (14).



Most importantly, one should remember that although in popular culture, “Frankenstein” brings to mind the being created in a laboratory by a mad scientist (complete with bolts in his neck), this is a misnomer. The Creature (as he is properly referred to) is never given a name which has serious implications regarding the isolation of an individual. First, the Creature has been rejected by his Father figure (Victor Frankenstein) to such a degree that he is not claimed in any familial way and therefore has no loving guidance nor personal history associated with a family and its lineage. Without a name, he has no connection as a descendant of others and therefore no way of knowing his nationality or place in the history of the world. In her article entitled, “The Monster in a Dark Room: Frankenstein, Feminism, and Philosophy,” Nancy Yousef notes, “Having discovered the difference between himself and human beings in the vacancy of a past that includes no friends or relations, the Creature struggles to understand what he is, but he cannot proceed much farther than the idea of his absolute uniqueness: ‘I had never yet seen a being resembling me. I saw and heard of none like me. I was dependent on none and related to none’” (Yousef 220). This isolation creates a sense of deep emptiness for the Creature and in turn, rage toward his maker. Having no name also robs him of any relationship to humanity as a whole; he is not a person but rather a thing undeserving of a name (this calls to mind the atrocities of concentration camps during the Holocaust). She also notes the repeated use of the words “alone, lonely, solitary, and even monster” to emphasize this sense of isolation (221). On his first day of attempting to know the world around him, the Creature ventures into a small village which, with its quaint homes, vegetable gardens, and even milk and cheese sitting in the windows, seems inviting and hospitable to any stranger. Yet, upon sight, the Creature is immediately attacked simply because of his appearance and brutally shunned from the “bar-

barity of man” (Shelley 73). Venturing far into the woods, the Creature secretly observes a family for the first time, and makes his deep emptiness abundantly clear by comparison: “He raised her, and smiled with such kindness and affection, that I felt sensations of a peculiar and overpowering nature: They were a mixture of pain and pleasure, such as I had never before experienced, either from hunger or cold, warmth or food; and I withdrew from the window, unable to bear these emotions” (Shelley 75). He realizes that he has neither the love of a parent nor the ability to love another in this same way. “But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses; or if they had, all my past life was now a blot, a blind vacancy in which I distinguished nothing” (Shelley 84). Even with the ill treatment he suffered at the hands of the villagers, the human need to belong and to be loved is still prevalent in his character. The Creature slowly gains knowledge by observing the lessons taught within the family but was “shut out from intercourse with them, except through means which I obtained by stealth, when I was unseen and unknown, and which rather increased than satisfied the desire I had of becoming one among my fellows” (Shelley 84). One has to presume that the Creature here may be speaking for Mary Shelley who spent much of her time as a young woman eager to enter into but removed from the philosophical conversations of the men who surrounded her both with her Father and his contemporaries as well as her own husband and his friends. Later, in his attempt to save a little girl from drowning, the monster is rewarded with only confused fear and a gunshot wound. This seals his rejection of all human kind and intensifies his growing rage.

It is interesting to note that at this point in the novel, Mary Shelley writes her own despair into the story. Her orphaned monster strangles Victor Frankenstein’s fictional

younger brother, William, whom she has given the same name as her own recently deceased child, William. It should also be noted here that William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft had originally named their unborn child William in hopes of a boy (Seymour 27). After Mary Shelley's mother's death, Godwin's first child with his new wife, whom they named William I, was stillborn (Mellor 8). One cannot ignore the connections between the author's fiction and her own life. Both Victor and Mary had mothers who died of a fever - and in Mary's case, it was her own birth that she and her father may have felt caused her mother's death. Mary is also, like the Creature, emotionally removed from her own father while also void of the presence of a mother's love leaving her to make her way in the world as an adult almost completely without parental guidance.

The absolute emptiness in both Victor Frankenstein and his rejected creation is evidenced in the mentioning of suicide which takes place three times within the novel. The first instance occurs when Victor is reflecting on the pain he has brought upon his family as well as the fiend he has brought into the world: "Often, I say, I was tempted to plunge into the silent lake, that the waters might close over me and my calamities forever" (Shelley 62). The only thing that stops Victor is the thought of his father as well as his beloved Elizabeth. On another occasion, the notion of self-destruction arises for the Creature who first curses Victor for creating him and then says, "Why did I live? Why, in that instant, did I not extinguish the spark of existence which you had so wantonly bestowed?" (Shelley 95).

The third mentioning of self-slaughter is expressed by Victor as he is trying to recover from the Creature's murder of his dearest companion, Henry Clerval: "At these moments I often endeavoured to put an end to the existence I loathed; and it required unceasing attendance and vigilance to restrain me from committing some dreadful act of violence"

(Shelley 132). The irony here is to be found in the young novelist's extensive experience with suicide. Her mother had tried to commit suicide. Her husband, Percy Shelley, also struggled with notions of suicide; only three years before the writing of this novel, when Percy believed her father was separating them, the distraught young man burst into the Godwin house. He rushed to Mary saying, "They wish to separate us, my beloved; but Death shall unite us!" and handed her a bottle of laudanum (the same compound that her own mother had used to attempt suicide over the loss of a lover). Percy Shelley then took a pistol from his own pocket declaring that it would reunite them after Mary's death. It is said that with tears streaming down her face, Mary was finally able to calm the passionate young man and soon afterwards, they left to pursue a life together. In 1816, the same year that Mary undertook the writing of *Frankenstein*, her half-sister would commit suicide with laudanum and Percy Shelley's legal and very pregnant wife (possibly by a different man) was found floating in the Serpentine lake in Hyde Park, London (Wolf 128).

The closing of the novel brings the Creature in line with the mortality of his maker and his own demise. For the entire length of his life, the Creature has been severed from happiness and the love of his fellow man:

I shall die. I shall no longer feel the agonies which now consume me, or be the prey of feelings unsatisfied, yet unquenched. He is dead who called me into being; and when I shall be no more, the very remembrance of us both will speedily vanish. I shall no longer see the sun or stars, or feel the winds play on my cheeks. Polluted by crimes, and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest but in death? (Shelley 161)

In *Modernism*, Peter Faulkner comments on the prevalence of doubt and self-consciousness within a Modernist text: “[It] requires the acknowledgement of its dual status as an imaginative act in both subjective and objective reality...It seeks ambitiously the comprehension of duality, the containment of paradox, antithesis, [and] contradiction” (58). The reader is given a window into the thoughts and feelings of the characters of *Frankenstein* - each of which is riddled with polemic internal and external conflicts which cause the demise of both the forlorn creator and his orphaned offspring. Michael Levinson writes in *A Genealogy of Modernism*, “Psychology, emotion, attitude become immediately accessible. There need be no scruples about the text penetrating a consciousness, because the text has become identical with a consciousness. Where an author may not go, the narrator is entitled to tread because, as a fictional character, he may quite plausibly give utterance to his beliefs, perceptions, inferences” (6). The Modern literary theme of isolation and emptiness of the individual pervades not only the private life of Mary Shelley but then is incorporated into the desperate characters of her famous novel.

## CONCLUSION

Mary Shelley was a woman beyond her time. She was the proud daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft who instilled in her a fierce outlook on the treatment of the downtrodden within society and a respect for the importance of the education of all people. Her father, William Godwin, made the theories of her deceased mother come to life by educating her thoroughly and exposing her to the greatest writers and theorists of the time. It is no wonder that this independent young woman would be desperately attracted to the famous poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, with whom she explored the world outside of London. Percy shared the same philosophies as her mother and father - particularly in the case of education, social equality, and atheism. The friends they chose to gather around them supported their rather bohemian lifestyle as they too were shunned from polite English society due to their own reputations. When the weather became unkind one fateful summer, Mary, her lover, and their friends retired to pass the time with horror stories and discuss the latest scientific experiments. A creature slowly came forth in the landscape of Mary's imagination which was the personification of all her influences, experiences, and curiosities.

The time was right for this kind of novel. English audiences were very receptive to stories which played upon their fears of the things that went bump in the night. Tales of ghouls, ghosts, and even the end of the world were part of the conversations they had in tea houses and homes. Some were baseless forms of entertainment and others were currently in their news but in either case, their fear of the unknown and unexplainable was palpable. Reports of ghastly experiments with electricity done first upon frogs and then upon cadavers reached every corner of England causing such a stir that they were even able to show these

experiments publicly to satiate public curiosity. Mary Shelley used this to her advantage and by marrying the latest scientific experimentation with the public's deep fear of the supernatural, created one of the very first works of speculative fiction - a genre which moves into science fiction and beyond.

This very educated author pragmatically challenged her audience to take these popular topics one step further by giving a fictional success to such endeavors. Through the character of Victor Frankenstein, she asked them to consider what the limitations of science should and should not be. These philosophical questions brought into focus the serious implications of what it might mean if science could equate itself with God. What would it mean for mankind if, like Prometheus, Victor Frankenstein could steal the secrets of the universe and bestow them upon humanity? One might rightly say that the Romantics loved grand endeavors for the good of humanity but *Frankenstein* goes beyond that in the failure of the novel's various characters. Robert Walton turns back from his quest to map out a new route to the Arctic upon hearing Victor Frankenstein's story. Victor Frankenstein himself, while successful in creating life, has no capacity for responsibility and love to guide his Creature. The newly born Creature displays the natural inclination to educate himself (a nod to Mary's mother's influence) and of the four books he finds, one resonates most clearly with the monster: *Paradise Lost*. Of all the books in the world, including the Bible, Mary gives the Creature a God who wars with his own creations and rejects them. All that results from Victor Frankenstein's quest is misery and murder - rage and rejection. For all purposes, the God of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is dead which is a very modern proposition. Her novel in this sense essentially becomes a critique of Romanticism and opens a new path of thought toward Modernism.

Modernist texts also often delve into the realm of the unconscious which this novel most certainly does as well. While it is true that Romantics loved to challenge restraints upon their behavior and interpretations of the world, this celebration left off at the doorstep of the darker realm of human psychology. Yet, this is a place in which Mary Shelley is very comfortable. Mary took the influences of herself and her friends, the behaviors of which were judged to be unacceptable by English society, and placed them squarely in the novel. What is impressive here is that it takes a bit of analysis to bring the unspeakable topics of homosexuality and incestuous yearnings to the surface. Audiences were probably left with a very uneasy feelings but may not have entirely understood why without looking very closely at what the author had done. Like her friend, Lord Byron, who was accused of both homosexuality and incest, the character of Victor Frankenstein shows an unusually close bond with the male characters as well as his own mother in the novel. In terms of the male relationships in the novel, Robert Walton leaves everyone behind and then expresses through his letters a desire for a male companion as he charts a new path to the Arctic. This wish is granted through the discovery of Victor Frankenstein whom Robert nurses back to health and dutifully records his every word. Victor conveys a story to Robert in which his own mother's death becomes the catalyst for his ruinous obsession with overcoming death. Throughout Victor's story, he remains emotionally and physically distant from his beautiful Elizabeth while at the same time preferring the dotting friendship of Henry Clerval. These topics were unacceptable - especially from a female author - and they reveal Mary Shelley's special talent to fearlessly cut straight through prudishness to the root of human psychology. This also aligns *Frankenstein* with Modern literature.



Another theme of Modern literature is a pronounced disenchantment with the world. The greed and ambition of Victor Frankenstein to the the recognized father of an appreciative new species is abhorrent. This is an ambition that reveals the dark heart of imperialistic ventures. Mary Shelley was very aware of the plight of slaves during the writing of her novel and had a strong opinion against corruption and the abuse of human rights which was initially influenced by her father and shared by her husband. Her Creature came to exemplify this disregard with a power that not only challenged the audience of 1818 but extended into future satirical social commentary for the next hundred years and more. The Creature came to represent the downtrodden faction of society who, once disregarded by a leader, is left to make their way in a world that demands submission and offers only scorn to those who refuse. Like the black slaves who were struggling to find freedom, the Creature is shunned by society based only upon his appearance and stripped of any love and regard. The Creature, as well as the minorities he represents, rises up against that figure who exercises such abusive power over him. As if in a warning against imperialism and slavery, Mary Shelley fills her rejected Creature with such sadness and rage that his story prompts consideration of the problems from a more inclusive perspective.

The final Modern theme chosen for this paper was that of the isolation and emptiness of the individual. There is no greater crime than to deny a name to a living human being. By never giving his Creature a name, Victor Frankenstein denies him a past, a family, a nationality, and a place within society. Victor refers to his creation as “monster” and “daemon” - titles that offer no humanity at all. The Creature equates himself at first with the Adam of *Paradise Lost* but then says that he is most like Satan - being shunned by Victor or this God he reads about who rejects His creations as well. Upon witnessing the simple and

happy peasant family of the woods, the Creature is made more aware of his differences not only in looks and stature but in education and resources. The only character who offers him a momentary glimpse of acceptance is blind which of course echoes Mary Shelley's concern with human rights. This emptiness extends to Victor Frankenstein who conveys his sad tale to a very isolated (literally as his ship is frozen in ice) Robert Walton. Victor has suffered the loss of various family members because of his own irresponsibility. Both the Creature and Victor express a preoccupation with suicide on several occasions within the novel. Mary Shelley was unusually familiar with the desperation associated with suicide attempts and executions within her own family. *Frankenstein's* characters, their experiences, and their emotional reactions all display a deep introspective reflection on the part of this amazing young author.

It is with this catalogue of proof that I humbly submit my theory: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* should be considered one of the seminal works of Modern literature. I believe there is great depth in what the modern world could take from careful analysis and philosophical examination of this novel. Mary Shelley's waking dream undeniably breaks the bonds of traditional Romanticism and with bold pragmatism and universal symbolism, illuminates a changing literary landscape and journeys forth into the Modern. *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* transcends the literary period to which it is formally assigned and endures because of its prophetic nature which speaks to future generations of readers.

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